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Black and white thinking These individuals are very literal. Autistic children don’t understand idioms like, “I’m all ears.” or “Hold your horses.” To an autistic child, “That’s so cool” means the temperature is not warm. Also, “Can you lend me a hand?” means you want to borrow his hand and take it home with you.

Extreme Sensory Input Issues. They feel touch in different ways than you do. Sometimes their skin is very sensitive and other times it won’t have much feeling. A child may be tantruming because the tag on the back of his shirt is painful to him, or the fluorescent lighting is too much for him. However, he may be fine with the lighting the next day. This continual inconsistency makes it very challenging for the parent to manage everyday events like buying groceries or just have a ‘normal’ family outing. Their reactions to you may be different from day to day.

Severe Impairment in Social Ability They don’t know how to make and keep friends. Most autistic individuals don’t have friends.

Delayed Language or Unusual Communication Most individuals with autism understand what you are saying, but either cannot speak, or are difficult to understand. Most parents are happy when people try to communicate with their child, even though it’s hard to understand him/her.

The child may have a hard time talking, or finding the right words to say. More severely autistic children may not be able to speak at all. They may stay quiet, hum, laugh, or scream. Some individuals may be able to communicate using pictures or sign language. For the individuals with speech, they may get confused, or stuck in a conversation. They may repeat what you say, or say a word over and over. They are not being rude, they are just stuck. You can help out by suggesting words, or letting them know you want to understand him.

If an autistic child’s speech isn’t delayed, his/her interactions are unusual or odd. They usually can’t have a normal ‘give and take’ conversation, but they could get a lot of happiness from telling you about their main interests.

They don’t understand nonverbal communication, and they don’t understand people’s facial expressions. A high functioning autistic boy in junior high
once asked his parents, “What does it mean when someone raises their eyebrows?” One can see from this question how very difficult it is for them to navigate in the social world. The expression on your face doesn’t help them understand what you are saying or feeling. Some children may be confused, and do things to comfort themselves by rocking back and forth or covering their ears.

**Poor Eye Contact** They may seem like they aren’t listening to you, or that they are ignoring you because they may rarely look at you. Keep trying to speak with them. They need social interactions so badly.

**Difficulty with Transitions or Changes** They do not like to be surprised. They like a routine, and it can be upsetting for them when it is disrupted. They may want to do something over and over to calm themselves down.

They may take five to ten minutes (or longer!) to be able to end the activity they are involved in, and go to the next. Parents try to let them know ahead of time, when a change will take place. They may be very upset when they have to change activities, or when something new is introduced to them.

Autistic individuals like things to be consistent. If something is out of place, it may upset them, and they may behave in strange ways, like flapping their hands, twisting their bodies, or tapping.

**Difficulty with pretend play** Their play is different from other children. They have a hard time using their imagination, and may have a hard time joining in pretend play. If they can do pretend play with friends, that is a major achievement! They may prefer concrete thinking games like computers, chess, or puzzles. Many children enjoy playing sports games.
Reaching Out To the Child with Autism

As parents of autistic children, we realize how difficult it might be to know how to reach out to the autistic individual. There is a lot of diversity in severity of autism, so each individual is very different from the next. Their needs are all different. There is no universal way or skills to reach out that will be effective with all autistic individuals. Parents are often trying new ways to help their children. It is always exciting to find someone willing to try to reach our children! Here are some positive ways that can be helpful when are reaching out to those with autism.

**General Suggestions**

**Say “Hi”**. The autistic child may not acknowledge you, or even look at you, but he knows when someone is being kind to him. Poor eye contact is one of the major characteristics of autism.

**Find out their interests**. Higher functioning individuals may have narrow interests that they would love to discuss with you. My 16-year-old son loves engines. He took a bucket of engine parts with him to a family reunion and discussed engine parts with his aunts, uncles, and cousins. It can be so rewarding to see “Uncle John” spending time with your child, when there was nothing for them to talk about before.

**Invite them to activities**. Most autistic children aren’t invited to birthday parties or events. Many parents would love for their child to be invited to activities. However, some thought it might be more successful to invite the birthday child for a one on one activity. Large groups of people are difficult for the autistic individual to manage, and his/her behavior may disintegrate.

**Speak to them**. It may be difficult at first, but you will learn what is important to them, and it is so good for them to learn to speak to others. Remember this is one of their major disabilities – they don’t know how to have a conversation. But they often appreciate the attention.
Suggestions for Church

**Provide individual support to enable success.** An 8-year-old child with severe autism has his own primary teacher, but they join the regular class. They sometimes leave to take a break and walk around the church. The child’s individual teacher meets with the parents to find out how this child learns, and what has been successful for this child in other places. There are special reinforcers for this child as well (fruit snacks, etc.) The parents were invited to speak to the whole primary about disabilities to help them understand. Now the children hardly look up when this child is loud or runs inappropriately.

**Educate children and adults.** Several wards have had parents of autistic children speak to them about their child in a primary sharing time, or during a combined Priesthood/Relief Society meeting. This has helped so much in understanding the child, and opening up communication. Education helps all feel more comfortable.

**Extend creative callings.** A 16-year-old boy who was having difficulty attending his Sunday school class was given the calling of assistant to the Sunday school president, and would ring the bells to dismiss class.

A 22-year-old individual, who wouldn’t attend Sunday school, was given the job of copying and collecting rolls. An adult was given the calling to help him do this.

A mother of a priest has expressed her desire for her son to have a calling. It is the only way her son felt connected, and the only way to get him to go to activities. Everyone wants to be needed.

One ward is extending callings to create a team to meet the needs of a family with a son who has severe autism. The team includes someone from the High Priests, Relief Society, Primary, and any other auxiliary that is needed to help them.

**Make him/her a part of things.** One mother said, “I like how our Primary doesn’t underestimate my son. They always ask if he’d like to give a talk or say a prayer. The answer is always “Yes”. They call on him when he raises his hand to answer a question. They can’t understand what he says, but they always thank him for participating.
Success in the Neighborhood

Not afraid. “The kids in our neighborhood aren’t afraid to talk to my son, and they keep an eye out for him. They make sure he isn’t alone when they see him walking on the sidewalk.”

Service Project. “My son has severe autism, and the neighborhood held an estate/garage sale with all of the proceeds going to build an ‘autism room’ in our basement for our son. He now has a safe place to go where he can play on slides and swings.”

Inclusion. “Our neighborhood has grown up with my son. He is still young enough that the other children don’t really notice his disabilities. They invite him to all of their activities, and he invites them to all of his activities. We don’t ever want to move, because we know we are so lucky.”

“Our next-door neighbors have an uncle with Down’s syndrome. They have been very good to my son. It seems that exposure to disabilities helps people feel more comfortable associating with someone with a disability. As a parent, it doesn’t matter if you are ‘good’ at understanding our autistic child. Just trying means a lot to us, and to our children.”

“My 16-year-old autistic son is an excellent driver, and loves cars. We don’t own a car with standard transmission, however. A friend in the neighborhood will let my son drive his car on outings together. He usually makes it contingent on my son getting to church, which has become difficult for him lately. This is a great motivator, and a very kind gift of time (and gas!) from our friend.”

“Our 3-year-old autistic son has a bus stop that is about a 20 minute drive from our house. One morning there were so many family emergencies going on at our home, that we called a friend to see if he could take our son to the bus stop. He called that night and asked if he could please take our boy the next day. He continued doing this for the whole year, and our son loved it. He has no idea how much this helped our family out. He was an answer to a sincere prayer from a mom that was stretched too far.”

One neighborhood has a few families with autistic children. They have created a neighborhood group that gets together once every few months to meet and talk about these children. Some of the topics they have discussed include keeping an eye out for these children to keep them safe, how to make sure they have friends to play with, how to help the families, etc.
Ideas for Adapting Primary Lessons for an Autistic Child

Visual learners. Autistic children are very visual—this is how they learn best, so make the lesson as visual as you can.

Create activities. If a lesson is on animals, God’s creations, or the birth of Jesus, make two copies of several animals, creations, or nativity scene elements. Have the child match the objects. Laminating the pictures helps them to be frequently used.

Use simple sign language. The autistic child feels more involved if you can help him sign what you are signing. For example, if you are talking about trees, make the sign for trees. Sometimes a child will need someone to take their hands and make the sign for them. They learn very well this way. Often many repetitions of the same sign will be needed.

More skillful with written words than speaking. Some autistic children can read even if they can’t talk. They like to see the words, so print key words from the lesson. The autistic child might enjoy matching words. This idea could be used with classmates. The child could match the classmates’ printed names to each child. It is also helpful just to have the other children’s names printed and posted in the room.

Role playing. Use role play as part of the lesson, but have the other children in the class do the role play first. The autistic child can watch which will reduce his anxiety. Then have him/her participate in a second round of the role play. The autistic child usually enjoys this kind of activity, but needs to see it visually before he understands what is wanted.

Use demonstrations rather than explanations. If there’s any way you can SHOW them something, they will understand it better than if you tell them. Sometimes the verbal instructions even for activities are too difficult. If the child needs help, take his hands and help him build Nephi’s ship, etc.

Teach through music. Music is a great way to reach them. Be repetitive. Sing the same song every week for a month. Make up actions to the song, or use some simple sign language. If a song tells a story, make pictures of the story, and have them put the pictures in order (for example, Nephi’s Courage, Follow the Prophet, etc.)
**Gather information from parent/caregiver.** Since each child with autism is unique, find out the strengths and abilities of the child. Can he talk, read, sit and listen? If possible, observe the child at home, church, and their school.

**One on one support.** The autistic child may need direct help or prompts. If you have asked the class to find a hidden picture in the room, and the child remains seated, help him stand up and ‘look’. Walk him around the room, and help him look in different places. Use positive comments often (for example, “Good job looking for the hidden picture, Joseph.”). The child really is learning when you do this, and he will usually need fewer and fewer prompts as he is helped this way.

**Reinforce good behavior.** Remember to reinforce the behavior you want. If she is sitting quietly, say, “Good sitting quietly, Amy.” Use a lot of positives, and use them frequently.
Shaping Positive Behavior in an Autistic Child at Church and in Primary

**Compliment, compliment, compliment** The behavior you pay attention to increases, and what you ignore decreases. Compliment the behavior that you want to increase. If you don’t see the behavior you want to see (sitting in his chair), compliment the children around him that are doing the target behavior. (“I like how Jacob is sitting in his seat. “I like how Julie has a quiet mouth.”)

**Positive reinforcement shapes behavior**
If possible, have the child sit close to the front. They are very visual, and will pay attention to everything that is going on in the room. If they are closer to the front, they will have fewer things to watch, and their attention can be focused on what we want it to be focused on!

**Join forces with parents in targeting/reinforcing key behaviors**
Talk to the parents, and see if there is a particular behavior they are working on that you could also target. The desired behavior may be just getting the child to sit in his seat. Don’t be afraid to enforce the desired behavior. For example, if he stands up, help him sit down. Depending on the preference of the parents, reinforcers like fruit snacks can also be used. Consult with the parents on how often the reinforcer should be given to the child – it may be every 5 minutes, or at the end of Primary. The goal when using reinforcers (other than praise) is to gradually increase the time between receiving the reinforcers. There will come a time when the child will no longer need the reinforcer. It can be exciting and rewarding to see the changes in behavior.
The chart below can help the autistic child understand his environment and his schedule at church. The pictures are laminated pieces that can be moved on velcro strips. When the child has accomplished an activity, they can turn over or remove the picture. This will make church more predictable for them, and give them greater comfort and understanding. This schedule can be simplified, or they can have a different one just for primary.

Art work is taken from:

Primary Partners, More A-Z Activities to Make Learning Fun, For Nursery and Age 3 Vol. 2. Ross, Mary H., Covenant Communications, Inc. 1997

Primary Partners, A-Z Activities to Make Learning Fun, For Nursery and Age 3. Ross, Mary H., Covenant Communications, Inc. 1995
What We Wish You Understood
Statements from parents with an autistic child

“Autistic children look the same as other children, so when their behavior is out of control, most people are understandably confused about what is going on with the child and the parents. My child might be tantruming because something in the store is different than it usually is, or the sounds in the store are too loud or confusing for him.”

“You get nervous to go anywhere because you’re afraid of what he (the autistic child) will do.”

“I wish people wouldn’t judge. It’s obvious when someone has a physical disability, but our children look normal. I feel badly when someone tries to “give him five” and he doesn’t respond normally.”

“It makes me feel like I am a bad parent.”

“You’ll never know how much power you have with your words – how much they can hurt us or heal us when our child is acting out in public.”

“My son once said, “I think there’s something wrong with me… like they (other people) don’t like.” I’m sad when I think of that.”

“Having a child with autism has taught me how much Heavenly Father loves all of his children, and how all of us are special to Him no matter how talented or ‘untalented’ we may be.”

“No one will play with my son. Even if one child would come for 10 minutes and play video games, it would make a big difference.”

Once my son wrote, “They think I’m dumb, stupid, and I don’t care anymore. And it makes me tired holding all my muscles from emotions and makes me sick and tired and frustrated.” I wish he didn’t have to face such a confusing world.

“My child had a very caring teacher one year. I asked him what made her so special and he said, “Because she understands kids like us and she loves us anyway.” It may not seem like it, but these children understand who cares about them.”
“A person in the store once said to me, “You know, if you would just discipline him, it would be better.’ It really hurt.”

“Even though I would never choose for my son to have autism, it has opened up worlds to me that I wouldn’t have known. I am learning more compassion and understanding. I have met wonderful people who truly want to serve and help these children.”

“There’s no one who can understand how hard it is to face a future like this. It hurts when even your close family doesn’t understand.”

“Autism takes such a toll on the family. There has been no such thing as a pleasant family night, evening meal, or family outing. Usually, there is a tantrum or discipline that needs to take place. We try to make it as normal as possible, but autism affects the whole family.”

My son had a job at a store bagging groceries. One day he upset a customer who asked him to double bag her cans. My son held his hands up and said, 'I'm the bagger, I know what I'm doing.'

The customer complained and my son's manager sent him home for the day. Devastated, he walked through our front door crying.

"He kept saying, 'I'm so tired of being autistic. I don't understand people,’” He describes it as one of the worst days of his life.

"I didn't know it was rude until I was told," he said.

“Please talk to my child, not to him through me. He can hear, but he may not look at you.”

“My child responds differently all the time. One day he will respond one way, and the next day, it will be different. Don’t expect the same reaction, but keep trying! Parents and close family get a different reaction all the time as well.”

“People have no way of knowing my son is autistic. When they know it, they have so much compassion, but I know his behavior is unpleasant to most people who don’t know his situation.”

“His face will not match his emotions. He may be happy, but he will look sad.”
“It helped so much to talk to our church group about my son’s autism. It helps everyone understand my child. Once I couldn’t find my child, and I was panicked. I saw a neighbor, and told him. He was unconcerned. After the bishop asked me to talk to the ward about my son, I got a very different reaction when my son was missing again.”

“It’s so helpful to find a way to teach the teachers. They are so important to these children.”

“I wish people would help our child socialize. Even if a neighborhood child came over for 5 or 10 minutes, it would be so great.”

“People forget that these kids are real kids.”

“Autistic children usually go to different schools than the neighborhood does, so they don’t have that commonality and bond.”

“It’s just the parents all the time.”

“Talking about my autistic son is like the subject of death for some people. People avoid talking about my son with me, because it’s uncomfortable. But it is my life. I want to talk about it, but it doesn’t have to dominate every conversation all the time.”

“They are all so different. If you have met one autistic child, you have met ONE autistic child.”

“Their spirits are not disabled, and they have the capacity to learn.”

“Sometimes if I discipline my autistic son, my extended family or neighbors might think I am too hard on him – that he doesn’t understand what is going on. I wish they understood how consistent I have to be in helping him change his behaviors.”

“It’s hard not to feel self-conscious about your parenting. I wish others knew how hard it is to manage my autistic son’s behavior. It is a constant battle, all day every day.”
“I wish you knew how much we want him to be accepted by other people. We know more than anyone else how ‘different’ he is. But we know more than anyone else how much he wants to be included. He has no idea how to have a conversation or how to visit with friends. It means so much to him and our family when he is invited to something.”

“I wish you knew how we try to help them manage their behavior. When you see the tantrum in public, believe me, we like it even less than you do. If you can think of a way to help, it would be greatly appreciated.”

“I wish you knew how many visits we have to make to specialists, therapists, and doctors, not to mention principals offices.”

A fellow shopper said to me once, “‘What did you do to your son to make him cry like that?’”

“Our family usually splits up to care for the autistic child. That means when we are having a family activity at home or outside the home, one parent manages the autistic child, and the other one is with the rest of the family. I think that affects all of the siblings.”

“I wish I could explain to other shoppers what is going on when my son is having difficulty in public. Behavior management is a major issue, and it’s not fun to do in the store. I feel like I try harder to manage my son’s behavior than any of my other children, and yet we still have so much difficulty.”

“I have my son’s teachers at school and at church read a book to the rest of the students at the beginning of the year. It’s about autism told from the viewpoint of the child. It has helped the other students understand my son more, and has been a positive influence for him. The book is Little Rainman by Karen L. Simmons.”
Books and Websites about Autism

Books
Behavioral Intervention For Young Children with Autism – Maurice, Green & Luce
This book has actual plans for programs for home teaching.

The World of the Autistic Child, Understanding and Treating Autistic Spectrum Disorders – Siegel, Bryna

This is a great book in helping children (and adults) understand autism, and how to be a friend to someone with autism.

Views From Our Shoes: Growing up with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs. – Meyer, Donald, ed. Woodbine House, 1997
Kids ranging in age from 4 to 18 share their experiences as the brother or sister of someone with a disability.

The autobiography of an autistic savant starting from childhood when he was incapable of making friends and prone to tantrums, to adulthood when he learned to cope.

Takes readers on a journey into the mind of a person who has autism, giving an insider’s view of a little-understood condition and destroying many myths and misconceptions.

Exiting Nirvana, A Daughter’s Life with Autism – Park, Clara Clairborne
This is the sequel to “The Seige” – very interesting Mom’s story

The Child with Special Needs, Encouraging Intellectual and Emotional Growth – Greenspan, Stanley I, M.D., Serena, PhD.
Using an intervention called Floortime to reach the child with special needs.

Little Rainman (Autism – through the eyes of a child) – Karen L. Simmons; Future Horizons
A little outdated, but one mother has her son’s teacher read this book to the class at the beginning of the year. It covers many autistic characteristics.
**Websites**

http://www.autism.org  
*Useful source of information on autism.*

http://www.aspergersyndrome.com  
*Up-to-date information relevant to higher-functioning autism*

http://www.autism-society.org  
*American chapter*

http://www.dotolearn.com  
*Contains free picture cards for making schedules, as well as other visual resources, facial expressions, learning games, etc.*

www.utahfeat.org  
*Utah chapter of a national organization*

www.autismcouncilofutah.org  
*Mission is to create communication and collaboration throughout Utah.*