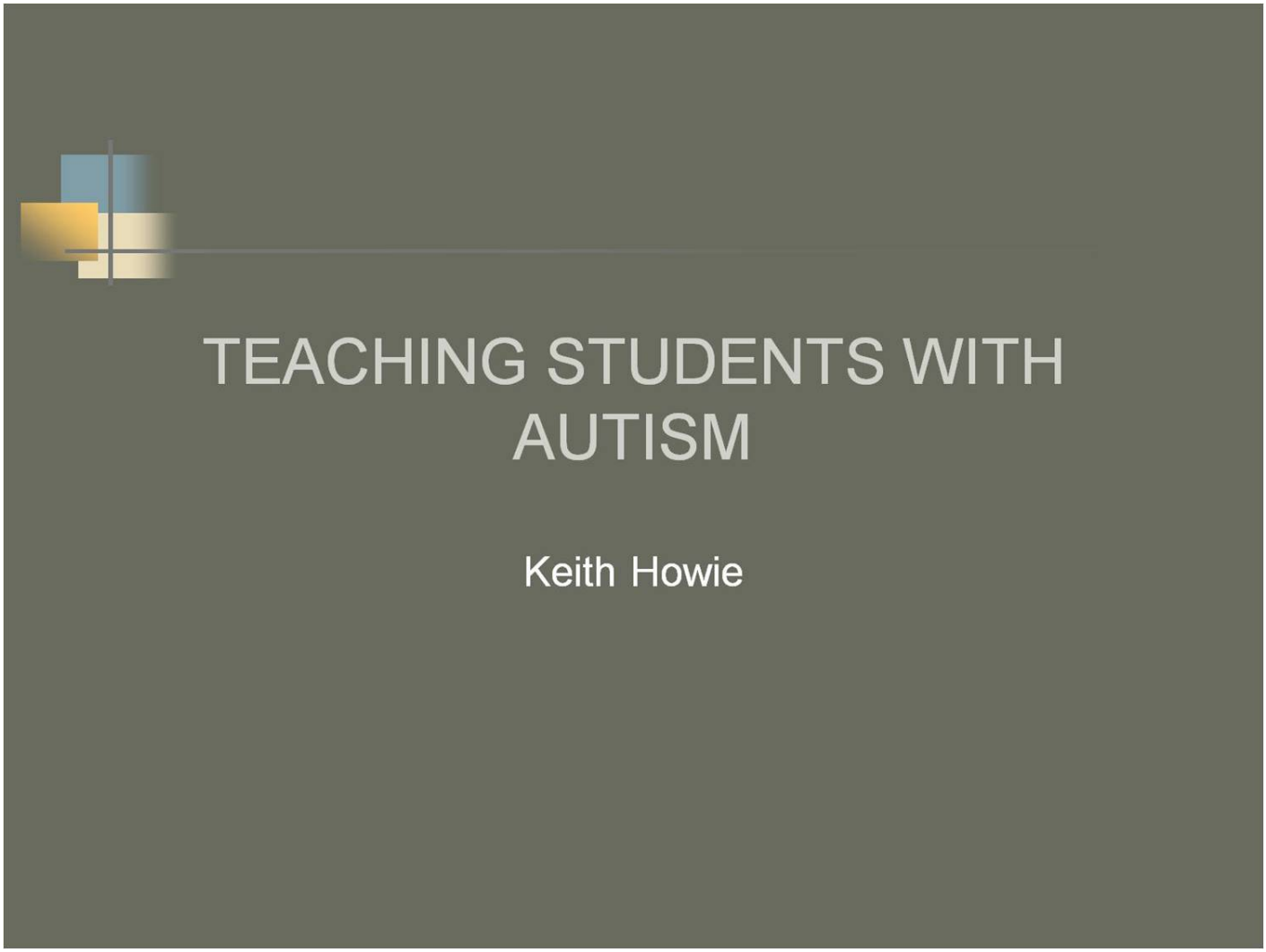
Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Conditions (A Powerpoint Presentation)



- This presentation provides an overview of considerations for teaching students with autism. Students with autism are, first and foremost, students. They have many more similarities to other students than they do differences. Although some students with autism present genuine instructional challenges, they learn well with appropriate, systematic, and individualized teaching practices.

- Autism is a disability syndrome characterized principally by significant problems in the development of communication and social functioning. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) encompasses a broad definition of autism that includes related disabilities such as Asperger Syndrome, Rett Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Autism and ASD are labels describing students with a great range of abilities and disabilities, including individuals with severe intellectual challenges as well as students who are intellectually gifted. With appropriate teaching, all students with autism can learn.

Some General Considerations

- Ensure that the student is in good health, free from pain and irritation, and in a safe, stimulating and pleasurable setting.
- Base the curriculum on each student's individual characteristics, not on the label of autism. A diagnosis of autism does not indicate what to or how to teach.
- Focus on developing skills that will be of use in the student's current and future life in the school, the home, and the community.
- Encourage parents and other family members to participate in the process of assessment, curriculum planning, instruction, and monitoring. They often have the most useful information about the student's history and learning characteristics, so effective instruction needs to take advantage of this vital resource.

- Provide structure throughout the student's school day
- Ensure there are clear guidelines regarding expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.
- Provide visual tools, such as written or picture schedules, to ensure that the flow of activities is understandable and predictable.
- Carefully plan all transitions to support the student to move from task to task, activity to activity.
- Before introducing new routines and new school experiences, careful plan how these will be introduced to the student and plan how this assistance will be provided.

Communication Issues

- Students with autism have significant challenges in understanding and using language for communication. Classroom environments must provide students with information on events, activities, and expectations in a manner that students with autism can easily understand. Visual supports are key to providing this support

Visual supports

- Visual activity schedules may be used to provide students with an overview of the school day and information on tasks for that day.
- Mini-schedules are helpful; they provide a visual analysis of the steps in a task or assignment that need completion by the student.
- In addition to providing supports for understanding classroom expectations, many students will also need supports for communicating to others. While most students with autism will learn to use speech to communicate, many still have great difficulty in expressing their needs and desires. They may need to use visual systems, sign language, or augmentative devices as an additional form of expressive communication.

Motivational Issues

It is important that the classroom provides activities and materials that are interesting and motivating. Actively engaging the student within instructional activities is critical to effective instruction.

- Observing the student completing different activities and in different settings will be helpful.
- Talk to family members to identify motivating objects & activities.

These preferred objects and activities may be incorporated in lessons, or used as reinforces to help the student's engagement or as rewards when tasks are completed.

Instructional arrangements should also provide opportunities for choice. Research has shown that when students have an opportunity to choose the activity, location, or materials for a task, they are more likely to be engaged in the activity.

Providing the student with frequent and meaningful reinforcement is often critical to sustaining motivation to engage in learning and to persist with activities.

Teaching Formats

These approaches have been identified as helpful:

- Discrete trial training
- Activity-based instruction
- Groups and peers

Discrete trial training

- Discrete trial training is an effective instructional format for teaching specific skills in an intensive, efficient manner. Skills are taught within a highly structured, one-to-one format providing clear and concise instruction, an additional prompt (as necessary), and an explicit reward for performing the skill successfully.
- Discrete trial training typically breaks a task into a series of steps, starting with a step very close to the students current level of skill and moving at the students pace of learning on to independent level on the complete task.
- Trials of instruction are provided on each step one after another with only a brief pause between trials, until the student has met an agreed criteria for success.

Activity-based instruction

- Activity-based instruction describes the teaching of targeted skills within activities and routines that are meaningful and motivating for the student.
- Teaching trials are embedded within student-initiated activities, within regular routines, or as a planned activities. Skills are taught within these meaningful and relevant activities and across contexts, increasing the probability that the student will use the skills independently and generalize this learning across activities and environments.
- For example, an arrival routine for a student may include putting his backpack away, finding his desk, and taking out his daily work folder. If the student were learning how to greet others, request help, and follow a visual schedule, skill instruction could be embedded in the arrival routine and across multiple activities throughout the day to increase the number of trials and opportunities for learning. Systematic instruction is used within each of those activities to provide instruction on the embedded skill.

Groups and peers

- Students with autism may also be taught effectively in small groups.
- In inclusive classrooms, non-disabled peers have been effective in providing instructional support.
- Co-operative learning groups also provide a format for including the student with autism who may be learning skills that are different from his peers.

Positive Behavior Support

- Some students with autism may exhibit excessive passivity, while others display patterns of disruptive or even destructive behaviours. Positive behaviour support is a proactive, constructive educational approach for resolving such behaviour problems. It is based on extensive research as well as principles regarding the rights of all students to be treated with dignity and to have access to educational opportunities.
- Positive behaviour support uses functional behavioural assessment to develop and implement an individualized behaviour support plan. The purpose or "function" of the behaviour for the student and the circumstances associated with its occurrences and non-occurrence's.
- The individualised behaviour support plan includes ways of preventing problems from occurring and a series of graduated responses to support the student when these behaviours do occur. This helps the student acquire more effective, desirable ways for interacting with the environment.

Age Span Considerations

The focus of instruction shifts as students with autism move from early childhood programs through elementary school to secondary settings. In the early years, instruction focuses on developing communication, social interaction, and adaptive behavior. As the child ages, elementary programs may focus more on academic instruction in addition to teaching language and social interaction skills. In secondary programs, instruction should shift to preparing the student for adulthood.

Instruction for young children should begin as soon as the disability is identified. Effective early intervention programs are ones that directly teach early communication and social interaction skills, use a functional approach in addressing problem behavior, provide intensive and systematic instruction, provide parent instruction and family support, and provide transition support as the child enters preschool.

In elementary school, instruction should support the child's growth in skill areas that are delayed and promote growth in areas of strength. Curriculum adaptations may be used to assist students in progressing in the traditional academic areas. School programs should also focus on helping the student learn how to negotiate social environments and develop friendships.

In the secondary and high school years, instruction should focus on the areas identified in the transition plan. The transition plan addresses post-school outcomes for work, community living, community participation, and recreation activities. Instruction for the transitioning student may include community work experience, using public transportation, and learning skills that will be important for living in the community. In high school, instruction may continue within general education settings although an individual student's schedule may reflect a greater emphasis on the importance of learning relevant post-school skills. For example, a student's schedule may include classes in computer, cooking, and chorus instead of courses in chemistry, algebra, and American literature.

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