

Special Educational Needs – Transition to Primary

Rules, Routines and Reasons The 3Rs of Autism

Wendy Fidler describes how a small autistic boy is working at his own pace and rhythm in a Montessori environment.

His parents, teachers and peers understand the importance of going with the flow of the three 'r's of autism – rules, routines and reasons; consequently Hilton is developing self respect, independence, empathy and an innate love of learning.

Like most youngsters with autistic spectrum disorders, Hilton does not like unexpected changes, but he copes with everyday living and learning increasingly well, because his parents, teachers and

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peers understand that he lives by self-imposed rules and routines (sometimes obsessively) which can be overwritten if he can understand the reason for change.

At the time of my assessment visit, when Hilton was not yet five years of age, his family and school were providing a consistent and sensitive approach to helping him manage his known anxieties and obsessions with objects and routines.

These naturally impacted on his experiences in the Children's House. For example, although Hilton loved music, and showed a great sense of rhythm and rhyme, and was eager to join in with musical instruments, there were certain musical sounds that he simply could not cope with. Similarly, low rushing noises, such as flushing the toilet or 'growly' game sounds would cause Hilton to become very anxious.

Over the past year, and approaching

what Montessori described as the second phase of development, i.e. 6-12 years, a factual, reasoned approach to his concerns have contributed to Hilton's good progress in coping with and 'repatting' his responses to these distressing environmental triggers. Hilton is now five and half, but already displays a typically 'primary age' strong sense of fairness, right and wrong, and desire to be with others of his own age. So much so, that Hilton's family can now prepare him for new experiences by using:

Rules

Normalisation has resulted in Hilton's adoption of Children's House rules. He has learned to mirror and interpret social interactions and expected patterns of behaviour through social stories, pictures

What we learn from Hilton's ability to repattern, or rewrite, his 'rules' has implications for all ASD children as they pass through transition to primary stage, when it is quite normal for all children to disregard practices they learned in the Children's House in their desire to try out new things and new methods:

- In the Children's House: Hilton successfully laid out the maths spindles in the order 1 – 9 until he watched a presentation of the decimal beads, after which he reversed the order in which he laid out the spindles, i.e. 9 – 1; his understanding of the right way to lay out a mathematics activity had overwritten his existing rule.
- At home: Hilton wrote the numbers 1 - 10 evenly across the page, from left to right, until some friends from school told him about their holiday in India and the direction of writing. He then wrote the numerals 01, 9, 8 etc from right to left across the page, perfectly spaced and with the number 1 in the correct place on the left side of the page.
- These observations have implications for all transition age children who transpose letters and numbers from time to time; clearly 'rules' have to be learned, adapted, relearned until defined neural pathways have developed and actions become automatic and the child is fully satisfied by their 'work'.



of facial expressions and what they mean, and role play. Although he is still in the first phase, i.e. 0-6 yrs, he is increasingly able to rewrite his personal rules to suit his newly emerging sensitive stage for empathy, fairness and moral understanding. Montessori Note: Specifically written Montessori command and action cards can help ASD children rewrite rules to suit specific situations.

Routines

Hilton more readily accepts change to routines as enters the transition stage. His desire to engage with others independently has resulted in a will to eat at the table with others at home, and to join in knowledgeably in conversations, even if he does still have a tendency to 'hold court'. He has repatterned his own expectations of himself, for example, by trying tiny tastes of new foods and sometimes surprising himself by liking them. At school he successfully takes part in trips, for example to the museum, which involve him adapting to change within boundaries to suit activities which meet the sensitive stages he is moving into. Hilton succeeds with a range of extra curricular sport, dancing and music classes, each with a different set of routines and friends.

Reasons

Hilton has adapted his self imposed rules and routines because he is moving into the second phase of development; his own inner urges accord with reasons to do so; the why and how of things, cause and effect. Hilton's strong sense of rule encompasses 'the right thing to do', and this has aided his social, emotional and academic progress enormously. By playing to Hilton's individual ASD strengths, his family and teachers have been able to reason with him, for example that 'big boys listen and pay attention' and that is the right thing to do. As a consequence Hilton has progressed more quickly than some of his peers, who pay less attention, in activities such as swimming. He is also clearly maturing in terms of empathy for, and knowledge and understanding of, his cosmic environment. ■

Parent Note: Non-fiction books have also prompted reasoning and CD Roms which explain how the body works best, i.e. the right thing to do; this has helped with Hilton's own repatterning of his desire to try new foods.

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An observation during the Montessori work cycle, in the Children's House

Hilton moved over to the light box and switched it on; this was his own choice and undirected. He collected some solid orange tessellating shapes and put them on the light box. He was not satisfied and said to me, "I need to find instructions." He picked up a blue card relating to another activity.

"Put the orange shapes away, and get the blue shapes out?" I suggested, "The blue shapes have instructions."

Processing this information, i.e. that a blue card requires blue shapes, and understanding the reason for the change, required Hilton's full concentration, but after a while, he wrote himself a new mental rule, he returned the orange shapes to their box and brought the blue shapes to the light box.

Bella came to play (not help) and Hilton was pleased about this. I could tell from his facial expression and contented sigh. Hilton insisted on showing Bella the instructions, but Bella preferred a trial and improvement method. For a while the two children worked independently, side by side.

Whilst watching the pair work things out for themselves I observed a classic Montessori learning experience: Hilton, with his strengths in spatial awareness, easily recognised the solid pieces from the instruction card, but after watching Bella's approach to the activity, he proceeded to experiment. Meanwhile, Bella switched onto the concept of recognising the three-dimensional, solid pieces on the two-dimensional instruction card, and proceeded to complete the puzzle by that method, helped by Hilton.

Both children practised using their less favoured learning style, they worked well together, and they challenged and built on what they already knew.

