

# Supporting the ASD Learner

ALAN AYMIE

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# Teach the Spectrum

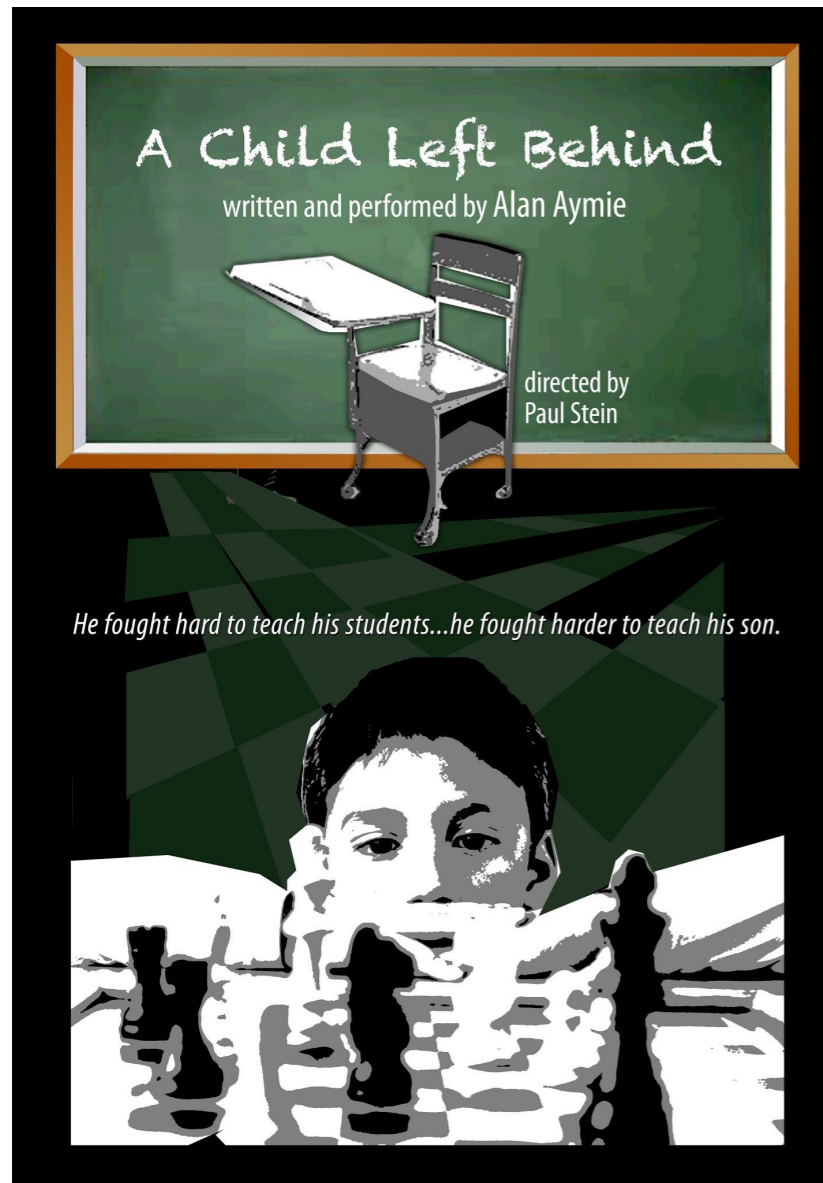
ALAN AYMIE

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## From Stage to Classroom

For the past ten years, Alan Aymie has been advocating for Autism Awareness with his critically-acclaimed solo play, *A CHILD LEFT BEHIND*. As a teacher in Los Angeles, Alan wrote about the struggles and discoveries he made before and after his son's diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. In the years that followed, he worked as an autism support specialist in Los Angeles, supporting students, teachers, parents, and administrators in supporting the ASD learner, all while continuing to tour the country with his play every April for Autism Awareness Month.

For more information on Alan, Teach the Spectrum and his play, *A Child Left Behind*, you can visit: [www.teachthespectrum.com](http://www.teachthespectrum.com) or reach out to Alan directly at: [alan@teachthespectrum.com](mailto:alan@teachthespectrum.com)



*"Compelling...Aymie proves to be a first rate educator..." - LA TIMES*

# SUPPORTING THE ASD LEARNER

## The Challenge

*"I can't get that student to do any work!"*

*"Last week, he threw his chair across the classroom when there was no chocolate milk for school breakfast...!"*

*"He's smart but so disorganized..!"*

Working in a public school where training and support for students on the autism spectrum is at a minimum, comments similar to these can be frequently heard in most teacher's staff rooms. The various academic challenges facing Gen-Ed (and Special Ed) teachers are already challenging. Trying to support those students with ASD (*Autism Spectrum Disorder*) can multiply these challenges tenfold. Whether it be a Gen-Ed teacher thinking these challenges are not their responsibility or a Special Ed teacher not being able to effectively support those teachers who need more support, the lack of knowledge and understanding about those students on the autism spectrum.

So, what exactly is autism?

The CDC (Center for Disease Control) defines autism as Autism Spectrum Disorder as a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. A few words to focus on here are: DEVELOPMENTAL, SOCIAL, COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIORAL. While developmental signals developmental delays, it also reminds me that growth does occur over time. Also, a reminder that autism is not a cognitive impairment necessarily.

My students on the spectrum can be capable of great work. One only needs to look at Sir Anthony Hopkins, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Dan Akroyd, and others who have all been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. This list could also include Nicola Tesla, Einstein, Thomas Jefferson, Andy Warhol, and Lewis Carroll, who have also all been suspected to be on the autism spectrum.

There is often nothing about how people with ASD look that sets them apart from other people, but people with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and yes, *learn* in different ways than most other people. People with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged in their abilities, and talents. There are those with ASD that require a great deal of help in their daily lives; there are others that need less.

So, if you're thinking, *"How can I - a Gen-Ed teacher with a whole classroom of children to support, possibly even begin to think that I can support those students with ASD in the my general education classroom?"* The answer is, "Quite easily, actually."

Here are four ways to support your student with ASD that you can start to implement in your class today.



*Think how our world would be different without the contributions of those people shown above.*

*"It seems that for success in science or art a dash of autism is essential."*

*~ Hans Asperger*

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## Educate Yourself

Neurodiversity is a viewpoint that brain differences are normal, rather than deficits.

All brains interpret, react and interact with the world in different ways. The pictured figures to the side are all (or believed) to be on the spectrum and how different world would be without their contributions. In terms of neurodiversity, which includes autism, ADHD, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia and Autism, we should all think of it as “Differences NOT deficits”.

In terms of autism specifically, autism affects one in fifty-four students. If you don’t have a child with autism in your classroom this year then chances are, that next year you will. Those students with autism have amazing strengths, abilities *and* challenges just like any other student. They just may present significantly different than your Neurotypical students.

They include:

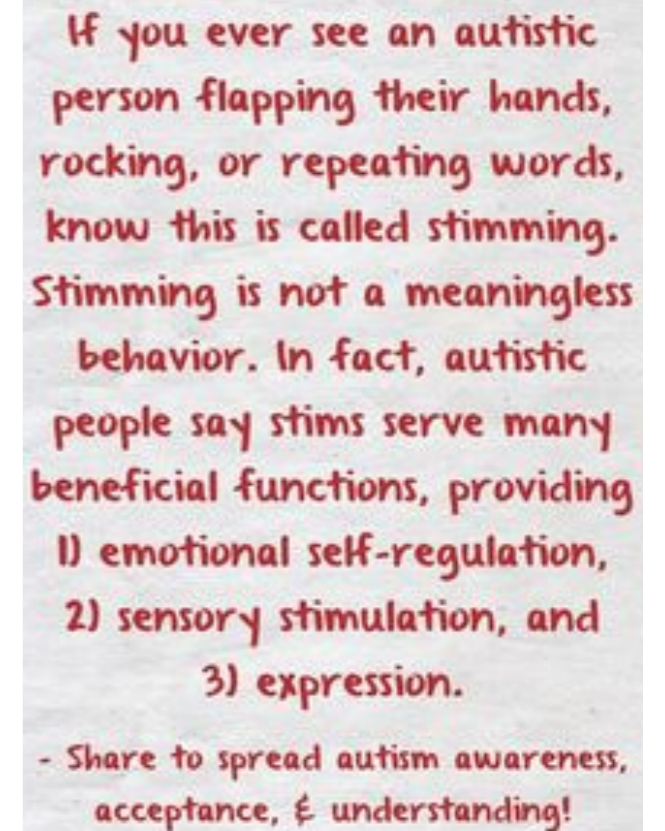
- **Emotional Sensitivity.**
- **Fixation on Particular Subjects or Ideas.**
- **Linguistic Oddities.**
- **Social Difficulties.**
- **Problems Processing Physical Sensations.**
- **Devotion to Routines.**
- **Development of Repetitive or Restrictive Habits.**
- **Dislike of Change.**

Think of a thermostat. Our minds work like a thermostat, constantly regulating our minds and bodies. We adjust to changes -

both noticeable and unnoticeable without any major challenges or problems. The student with autism, however, is completely different: temperatures, textures (shirt collars), being touched (the crowded school yard), noises, changes in schedule, the way people talk, act and behave and just about everything that goes on in a classroom requires a constant modulation.

Those students with autism struggle with this ability to modulate and therefore seek safety in routine and rigidity. In a moment where their routines, world, life modulation are affected too greatly, they can have what’s called, a “Sensory Overload”, or “Meltdown”. This is NOT a temper tantrum. They may look similar but they are completely different starting with their purpose: a temper tantrum is to GET something. It’s purpose is to go towards something: more time in the park, an ice cream, extra screen time, etc. A Meltdown is to get AWAY from something. Excessive heat, noise, too many people on the school yard, noisy classroom, bothersome shirt collar that mom forgot to cut off, or a whole host of other things that most Neurotypical people won’t even notice.

As teachers, it’s not our job to know ALL the possible factors that might contribute to a sensory overload but to just realize that they occur and to be empathetic when they do.



If you ever see an autistic person flapping their hands, rocking, or repeating words, know this is called stimming. Stimming is not a meaningless behavior. In fact, autistic people say stims serve many beneficial functions, providing

- 1) emotional self-regulation,
- 2) sensory stimulation, and
- 3) expression.

- Share to spread autism awareness, acceptance, & understanding!

## STRENGTHS

Along with challenges, our students on the spectrum also have many great strengths as well. They include:

- **Strong long-term memory skills.**
- **Direct communication.**
- **Math, computer, musical, artistic skills.**
- **Thinking in a visual way.**
- **Fair and just**
- **Punctuality.**
- **Honesty.**
- **Detail oriented.**
- **Special Interests**

Unfortunately, these strengths can sometimes be seen as troublesome in a busy school setting where there are so many challenges that present more obviously (reading challenges, math struggles, etc.).

Just imagine how many times someone like Dan Akroyd might have got into trouble while he was in school. Thomas Jefferson, Tesla, Steve Jobs and Elon Musk have been described by many as “difficult” in the midst of their individual successful careers. Can you imagine how their childhood school days might have been characterized by their teachers? All of these challenges to the unknowing educator could possibly be seen as simple non-compliance. The student who blurts out every answer, speaks



*Autism in one photo: the most beautiful rainbow and bombastic lighting storm at once*

bluntly (maybe even rudely?) to others, lacks inference and other subtle comprehension skills, spends too much time on one thing and refuses to participate in topics where they lack interest but they are all autism appropriate reactions to certain situations.

In most cases, the most direct and effective way to help support an ASD Learner and redirect them towards their educational goals can be found on the page that follows....

**THE ASD SOLUTION: IN A NUTSHELL**



**Now the question becomes...“HOW??”**

## LEVERAGE SPECIAL INTERESTS

A math lesson can still be a math lesson if you use trains, sharks or any other thing that might be a special interest for your student on the spectrum.

A Kindergarten student I worked with at one school had spent most of his days in the resource room because his teacher would get so frustrated with his lack of effort around classroom work. This student - while not non-verbal - did not talk in class, participate in classroom activities and spend his time sorting and organizing this collection of old broken crayons.

In an attempt to engage him, I bought a 96 Count of crayons that engaged, excited, and prompted a surprising verbal response where he clearly demonstrated his ability to read by stating each crayon color. His teacher was shocked and soon realized she could engage this student by recreating a lot of her lessons with crayons as a manipulative.

Many students on the spectrum demonstrate exceptional abilities in a vast array of skills and talents. Sometimes the interests and/or talents of the individual may become quite specific and somewhat obsessive. Other students may not demonstrate exceptional skills. Whenever these

talents or interests seem obsessive, consider possibly using them to widen student learning towards other subjects.



*How many different math problems, vocabulary words can you get out of a box of crayons?*

## QUICK WAYS TO LEARN ABOUT

### SPECIAL INTERESTS:

- 1. Observe.**
- 2. Look at T-shirt decals (i.e.; dinosaurs, Batman, Birds, etc.)**
- 3. What is the student "Monologuing" about?**
- 4. Talk to parents.**
- 5. Ask last year's teacher.**

# SUPPORTING THE ASD LEARNER

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## CREATE AN ASD SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

The challenges faced by those students on the autism spectrum are many but there are a few specific areas of focus that can greatly support your ASD Learner.

Think back to the imagery of the thermostat - we, as teachers, must act as the “thermostat” for our ASD students creating an environment that is not too hot nor cold.

Think: **Safety & Engagement.**

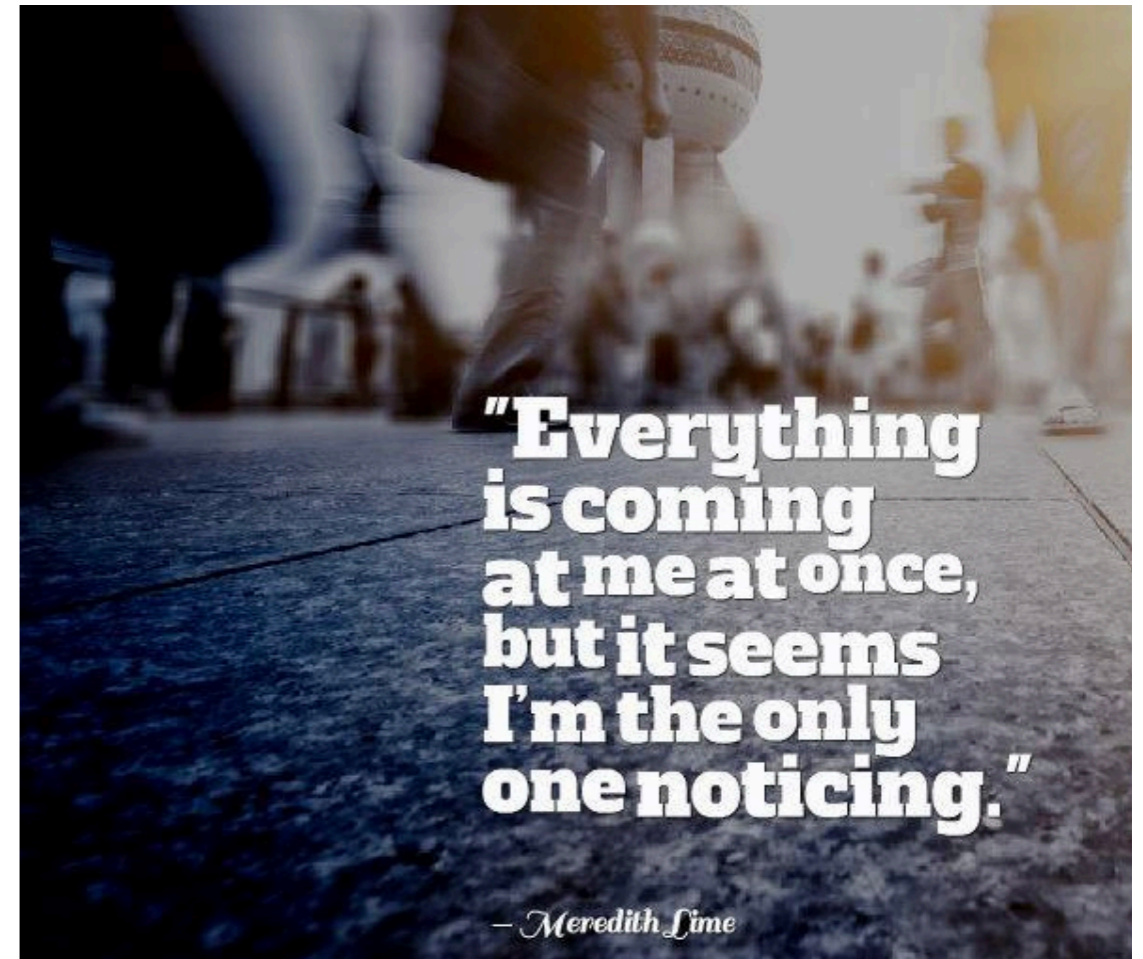
The anxiety that emerges around an inconsistent learning environment can be a great impediment to student learning and classroom harmony, so we must think of how we can lessen those stressors and anxieties. Remember:

### **“Similar is Safe”**

Everyone likes to know what’s coming next. Your students on the spectrum need this knowledge even more so than your neurotypical student. The school day is a blur of rushing students, loud noises, transitions and other unexpected moments of anxiety. The more you can help your students know what is coming next - the better for them. In a moment where their routines, world, life modulation is

affected too greatly, they can have what’s called, a “Sensory Overload”, or “Meltdown”. This is NOT a temper tantrum. They may look similar but they are completely different starting with their purpose: a temper tantrum is to GET something. Its purpose is to go towards something: more time in the park, an ice cream, extra screen time, etc. A Meltdown is to get AWAY from something. Excessive heat, noise, too many people on the school yard, noisy classroom, bothersome shirt collar that mom forgot to cut off, or a whole host of other things that most Neurotypical people won’t even notice.

As teachers, it’s not our job to know ALL the possible factors that might contribute to a sensory overload



*There are seven senses - all of them are affected by ASD*

but to just realize that they occur and to be empathetic when they do.

Some ideas for creating a supportive environment



## Provide structure:

Provide clear and consistent visual schedules, routines, and extra transition time to help support a sense of safety and familiarity.

## A Calm Environment

Replace flickering fluorescent lights, avoid excessive classroom decorations, use headphones to help block noise, avoid high traffic times, etc.

## Inform transitions & changes:

Changes can be very anxiety-causing, especially when they are unexpected. Warnings and notices about upcoming changes, countdown timers and other tools can help.

## A Self-Regulation Area:

A calming room or corner, and/or objects or activities that help to calm (e.g. bean bag) provide opportunities to regroup and can be helpful in teaching self-control.

## Non-Structured Time Aid

Lunch rooms, recess yards, auditoriums, auxiliary classes, group work, are all unstructured environments that require compassionate support.

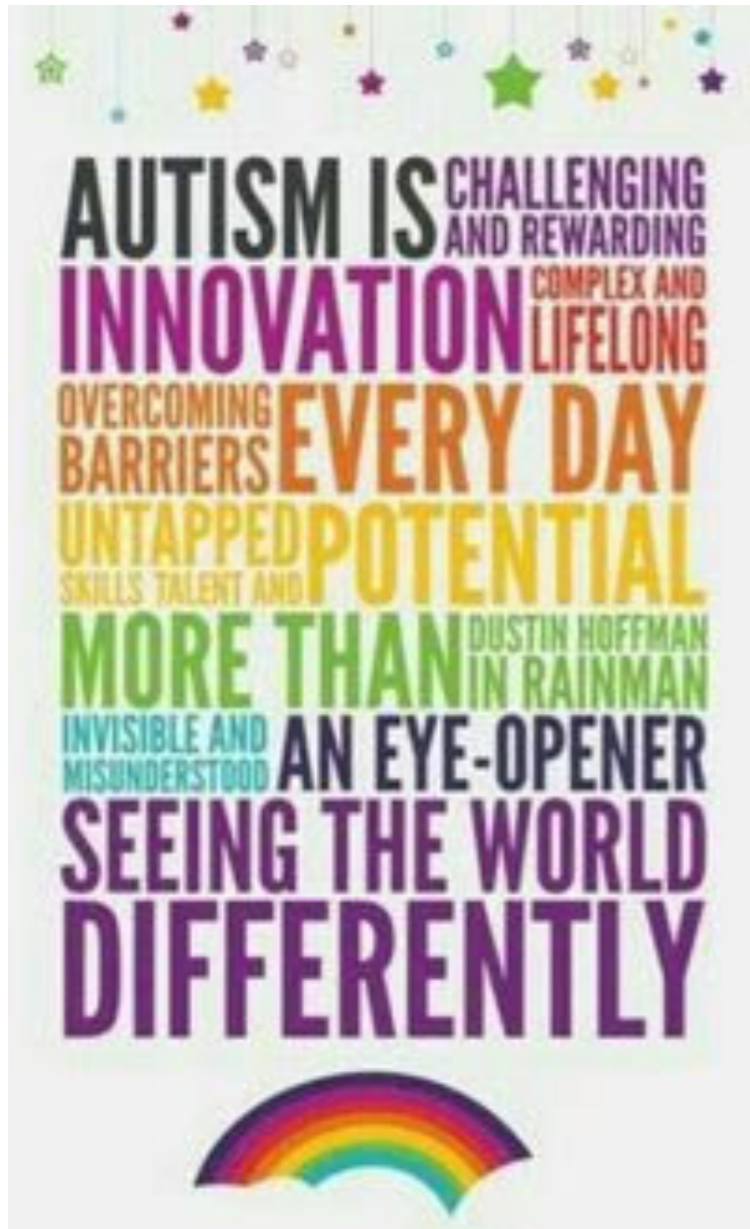
## Visual Supports:

Pictures, text, video modeling and other visual tools provide information that is more effectively processed by ASD visual learners.



## SUPPORTING THE ASD LEARNER

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### A FEW OTHER POINTS

#### 1. Connection Before Correction

Take the time to connect to your learner *BEFORE* pointing out any corrections to behavior.

#### 2. Avoid Debates with Redirection

Individuals with ASD often have trouble “getting” your points. If the repetitive verbal argument or question persists, consider the possibility that they are very concerned about the topic, and that the topic can be “Put it Aside” by writing it down in a notebook so they can see that it will be readdressed at a later time.

#### 3. Support Communication

Since these individuals experience various communication difficulties, do not rely on the student with ASD to relay important messages to their parents about school events, assignments, school rules, etc. unless you try it on an experimental basis with follow-up.

#### 4. Support Their Desire to Connect

If your class involves pairing off or choosing partners, either draw numbers or use some other arbitrary means of pairing. The student with ASD is most often the one left without a partner. This is unfortunate, as these students could benefit most from having a partner.

#### 5. Understand the Social Challenges

Be aware that students with spectrum challenges are socially naïve and lack guile. This makes them perfect targets for bullying. Make sure that your school uses active bullying prevention plans and lead by example by not sighing or rolling your eyes when the student with ASD is doing something you find irritating. If students see their teacher being unaccepting, they will follow the example.

#### 6. Your student’s struggles are affecting them far more greatly than they do you

Be compassionate. Breathe. Calm yourself before addressing student. Know they are trying their best.

*“Schools connect children to their communities. Jobs connect adults to their societies. Persons with autism deserve to walk the same path.” -Ban Ki-moon*

### About

As an autism support specialist/SEL Learning Facilitator, Alan has worked with dozens of Los Angeles schools and hundreds of teachers, students and parents in providing social-emotional learning and autism support for children on the autism spectrum. As a parent to a child on the spectrum, he knows first hand the benefits of early intervention. Each April, he tours the country with his critically-acclaimed solo play, *"A Child Left Behind - My Education in Autism"* to raise money for autism awareness. In his spare time, Alan volunteers with *The Miracle Project*, supporting young adults with autism. A member of New England's Asperger's/Autism Coaching Association, he strives to support children and young adults on the autism spectrum. Alan currently lives with his wife and children in Beverly Hills, California.

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