

Key Learning Skills for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Blueprint for Life

Nicole DeWitt

Thomas L. Whitman

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Children with autism spectrum disorders live in a vastly different place than the rest of the population. Their world is loud, confusing, overly bright and inconsistent. What might appear beautiful to most of us – a sunny day, a musical concert – could cause high levels of anxiety in a child with ASD. What neurotypical children do with ease – run and play with peers, sing along with the group – can seem impossible.

Psychologists Thomas L. Whitman and Nicole DeWitt have put their many collective years of professional service in the autism community to work in their new book. Educators and parents alike will find it extremely helpful as they navigate the often perplexing world of ASD. Addressing topics which include empathy, social engagement, communication, and attention, Whitman and DeWitt outline strategies that will enable caregivers to teach autistic children the skills they need to survive and thrive in a world that can be unforgiving in its demand for conformity.

Whitman and DeWitt manage to strike the perfect balance between theory and practical advice. The first few chapters center around different methods of intervention, such as correspondence training, exposure, and reinforcement systems. Included in these explanations are discussions about the science behind the methods, which methods have shown to be more successful, and why.

Subsequent chapters focus on the reasons behind interventions for specific areas, which include sensory issues, motor skills, and emotional needs. For example, in the chapter about communication they write,

“Because both home-based and school-based education programs use verbal instruction as a major tool for teaching, it is imperative that these children become proficient in the use of language as early as possible and to the fullest extent possible. Language provides a foundation and is a prerequisite for the development of many motor, cognitive, and social skills.” Referencing dozens of scientific studies, the authors lay out arguments for intervention based on research instead of promising miracle cures and easy fixes.

Within each chapter the authors offer step-by-step lesson plans that describe practical applications of these interventions to the specific problem area being addressed. Materials lists, action plans, and troubleshooting strategies are included in each program example, which grant the parent or teacher the best possible chances for a successful outcome. The plans are issued in clear directives and include props that are easy to find or make – no shopping trip necessary. Especially helpful are the troubleshooting sections; if readers run into a problem during a session, they have immediate suggestions on what to do differently.

Parents of children newly diagnosed with ASD may be looking for more emotional comfort than Whitman and DeWitt have to offer here, but those who've gone past the overwhelmed stage and entered the determined stage will find enormous support. The authors are refreshingly matter-of-fact in their approach to autism and based solidly in the scientific camp. With their help, parents, educators, and children can all make great strides.

ANDI DIEHN (July 21, 2011)

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