

Autism Asperger's Digest Interviews
Dr. Jim Ball, Ed.D., BCBA

Dr. Jim Ball (aka "Dr. Jim") writes the column, "Building Blocks of Early (and Later!) Intervention" in every issue of the Autism Asperger's Digest. This short AADigest interview with Dr. Jim echoes his positive approach to working with individuals in the autism community, and offers some sound advice, to boot!

AAD: What is it about kids and adults with ASD that keeps you coming back for more?

Dr. Jim: Their infectious sense of loyalty. So many people with ASD I've met are so comfortable with who they are, so comfortable in their skin, so much more than I could ever hope to be. They are very loyal to people they know they can trust.

AAD: What's the toughest behavior problem you've ever had to figure out?

Dr. Jim: I once worked with an eight-year-old student with ASD who was highly self-injurious. He had a very limited communication system and a great deal of sensory issues. He would self-mutilate to the point of leaving "craters" in his skin that would gush blood when opened. When I met him he was in a 3:1 situation, 3 staff people working with him. They worked very hard at re-directing his behaviors and keeping him safe. They were some of the best professionals I have ever met in the field.

After completing a careful review of all the data, performing a functional behavioral assessment and then putting a functional communication system in place, this young man made remarkable progress. A combination of a good behavioral program, a good sensory program, a good reinforcement system and the use of limited psychopharmacology really made the difference, along with an awesome staff implementing it.

Today, that young man is in a self-contained classroom with other students and is included for several academic/special areas with his neurotypical peers. He communicates very effectively with both an augmentative device, as well as using his verbal language. He is now happy and achieving. We should *never* give up on these kids. So much can be done – and their futures can be so much better – when we tailor programs to their individual needs.

AAD: What one bit of "never forget" advice would you give to parents of a newly diagnosed child?

Dr. Jim: Autism is not a devastating disorder that will alter your life, unless *you* let it. That's not to say it's not going to be hard sometimes. There are going to be days you wonder "why" this happened, and you'll have grief and challenges you'll need to work through. That's all very real. But, if you establish your "family" plan, get everyone on board, and stay consistent, you will do well and your child will do the same. You just have to hang in there, and stay the course.

AAD: What one thing would you say to educators about teaching these kids?

Dr. Jim: Don't ever underestimate their knowledge base and label them as unable to learn. I've worked with young people with ASD who at first glance look as though they can't really do much. And, there's the catch: if you don't challenge them, they will continue to do nothing. However, if you expect them to do what it is you want them to learn, they will rise to the occasion. It's your choice, not theirs. They will do what is expected. Expect little, and you'll get little. Expect more and you'll get more. Most kids are like this; kids with ASD are no different in that regard. Yet, I continually see teachers who just don't challenge these kids and make the assumption they can't be taught. It's a shame...for the child, for the family, for the teacher.

AAD: You've worked with PreK kids, adults, and every age in between, in a variety of settings. What thing(s) are most important for parents to focus on as these individuals grow from toddlers to adults?

Dr. Jim: Overall, keep an eye towards the future. Even when the child is very young. Your goal is a happy, functioning, independent adult, equipped with the social, academic and personal skills to not just survive, but thrive in our world. Don't forget that goal!

PreK: focus on joint attention and independent scheduling...both are important life-long skills.
Joint Attention: Kids watching other kids to gain information. Too many times, the child on the spectrum is not "prompted" to watch their peers during joint attention opportunities. They just sit in "their own world" until it's their turn. If we step in and turn our kids' bodies and faces to watch their peers when they talk and it is done often enough, they will do it on their own. But this needs to be taught. They will not magically learn it on their own. Joint attention is such a pivotal social skill. Just this one skill will lead to better social interaction later, throughout the child's life.

Independent Scheduling: It is critical to establish an organizational system for all kids when they are in pre-school, even more so for the child with ASD. The good news is that this is easily taught. When the child comes to class he grabs his independent schedule; maybe it has a picture of a shape sorter and a picture of a puzzle. The child is then prompted to go and get the shape sorter, play with it, then put it away, then look again at the independent schedule, get the puzzle and then play with that, then put that away. You are establishing an "organization system" that will grow as the child grows and become more sophisticated as the child does.

Elementary Aged: focus on establishing learning routines

You want the child to enjoy learning and be able to gain and retain the information being presented. This is done through a combination of things: Having a functional communication **system** in place (not one, but many ways for the child to communicate wants, needs, desires, etc.) and having an individual reinforcement system in place (to motivate the child).

Middle School Aged: focus on consistency

Most kids with ASD spend their elementary years in somewhat small programs, with a consistent group of kids, where they are very well protected by both their peers and professionals. Then we feed them into what we call "middle school." This is a tough enough transition for neurotypical kids, let alone those with an ASD. It is extremely important that all the strategies and systems that have been successful for the kids in elementary school stay consistent, follow them and are

incorporated into their “middle school” experience. This is too often not the case. They are moved into this highly social environment, where teachers hold significantly different expectations about workloads, attitudes and behaviors, without adequate preparation. Preparation is essential at this significant education transition: preparing the child with needed social and study skills, preparing his new teachers with training as needed, even preparing the school administration and IEP team, if needed.

High School Aged: focus on social skills for success

Of course, this is not the first time in a child’s life that social skills are important. Social development is ongoing, starting from the time a child is very young. And, it never stops...not for them, not for any of us. However, the high school years are the time to focus on those skills the child will need to succeed in college or in the work world. Again, think ahead and teach the skills the child will need to be that successful, happy, functioning adult.

AAD: As a community, where do you think we fail our kids?

Dr. Jim: We still don’t fully acknowledge and give enough credit to what these individuals have to offer. Too many times we dismiss them as not being able to do things, or have the skill levels to succeed. In reality, there’s much we can learn from them. Always keep an open mind and don’t be so afraid to entertain a reality that’s different from your own cozy, patterned life. You just might find yourself enjoying your own life a little more!

AAD: You’ve been working in this field over 20 years now. Looking back and comparing it to today:

- What changes do you think propelled us forward?
- What changes have held us back?

Dr. Jim: I think the one thing that propelled us forward is parents. If it were not for the parents of individuals with ASD, I’m not sure we would be seeing the successes we are today. They believe in their children and know what they can do, how much they are truly capable of achieving. Parents have paved the road for others, challenged conventional thought, pushed the rest of us towards greater awareness, better programs and services, and more legislation that benefits this population. If it was not for them, I am not sure we would be any further ahead today than 20 years ago.

I think the one thing that has held us back is the lack of funding for services across the board for individuals with ASD. We spend a great deal of money on prevalence studies and searching for the cause and cure of autism, which is all well and good on a certain level. However, we spend very little – much too little - on appropriate services that are so desperately needed for individuals living with an ASD now. We need better early intervention services to catch kids with challenges as early as is possible. We need more funding for education – appropriate education for our kids, tailored to their needs. Our children of 10-15 years ago are becoming adults today. The services for this growing group of individuals are pretty non-existent. At some point in the near future this is going to bite us in the butt – big time! I’m not saying we shouldn’t research a variety of things related to ASD, but we should not forget the quality of life of those individuals living with ASD right now.

AAD: Where do you think we'll be in our understanding of ASD 10 years from now?

Dr. Jim: I hope in 10 years we celebrate the commonalities that exist between ASD and the neurotypical world. True acceptance happens when we focus more on how we are the same than how we are different. It's sad to see that we have a ways to go yet in this regard.

AAD: Given a magic wand, what would you do for individuals with ASD?

Dr. Jim: I would give them the opportunity to be treated fairly in all aspects of life.

AAD: How has working with spectrum individuals changed you?

Dr. Jim: I am the luckiest man in the world. I love my job. I wake up every morning and go to work with a smile on my face because of the people, families, and professionals with whom I work. I laugh, cry, cheer, and jeer everyday and I would not have it any other way. The kids and adults I have had the great fortune to work with in my career have taught me that it's OK to be different, and a lot of times it's even fun. That has opened my eyes to explore who I really am, and how I want to create my life. It's been a wild and wonderful ride and I look forward to many more years of surprises.

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