



I Can't Argue With That!

10 Valuable Strategies
that Work with Individuals
with ASD

Sometimes those of us on the autism spectrum cannot effectively express what we need, or why we need it. Why do we always need things done exactly the same? We don't know. A neurotypical child might say "Because it makes me happy", but we can have difficulty expressing our emotions. This results in frequent communication confusion.

It is natural we will use our strengths to try to meet our needs. These can include our intellect and logic. Normal discussion, coupled with these strengths, can easily lead to arguments.

Those of us with AS can form patterns quickly, which are hard to change. If arguing works and we develop a pattern of arguing as children, this pattern can stay with us as adults, with serious consequences. I know from personal experience! Parents and significant adults in our lives (teachers, service providers, etc.) who can minimize our arguing as children will be doing us a huge favor. Here are some suggestions to help do just that.

Avoid Our Strengths

Our strengths are often in the areas of intellect, will power, logic, and ability to argue. It is rarely helpful for you to engage us in these areas.

As children, we will often lack good judgment and a sense of perspective. We will have more time than you do. Because of these factors, we can devote an almost endless amount of time to arguing with you.

It's best not to go near our strengths. You have other cards you can play that won't frustrate you and sap your energy. These other cards won't reinforce a disruptive pattern of arguing that causes many of us grief as adults.

Play to Our Weaknesses

Our weaknesses are often in the areas of emotions and considering other's feelings. Focus your efforts in these areas when trying to influence us.

We need to learn in childhood that logic, arguments, and reason are not the highest goods. We need to learn the emotional needs of others are often greater goods.

Don't use a logical argument like, "You have to go to bed because you have to go to school in the morning, and you have a test, and you have soccer after that, and you're going to be tired so you need your rest."

Logical arguments may seem very seductive, and seem to be a good way to avoid a meltdown, but they offer false hope. We can say, "But I'm not tired, I studied for my test, it's going to be easy, I can take a nap at lunch, I'm only going to be playing goalie anyway." Does this sound familiar?

Use emotional needs-based statements like, "You have to go to bed because I'm very tired, and I need to have some time to myself to relax and unwind."

We have difficulty arguing with that. How can we tell you you're not tired? We may try, but we know we're on shaky ground.

Emotional Content, Tone, and Blame

Emotional content is "I'm tired and frustrated." Emotional tone is whether you say these words in a neutral or angry tone. Emotional blame is whether you say, "You're making me angry" or "I'm getting angry." The first statement blames someone for your emotions. The second simply state your feelings.

We need to hear emotional content in language. It is good for us to sometimes hear emotional tone in your voice when we upset you. Both help us learn the impact our behaviors can have on others, and can reduce arguing.

Blaming us for emotions is never good. We have many defenses that get triggered when this happens. Our reason can go out the door, and meltdowns can occur.

When correcting us or asking us to do something speak as if you are telling us an unemotional, indisputable fact. Use a "2+2=4" tone. The sky is blue. 2+2=4. You have to go to bed now. You don't debate any of these facts. They just are.

Be Explicit

Many times we are genuinely confused over what is expected.

Often those around us ask us to water plants on a counter. We do, but don't water plants dying on a shelf beside the counter. People tell us to put clothes in a dryer. We do, but don't turn it on. When confronted, the arguing can start: "But you didn't tell me to do this or that."

This extends equally to AS adults as to AS children.

When asking us to set the table say, "Please set the table by putting the napkins, plates, glasses, knives, forks and spoons on the table. When that is done, put the salt and pepper on the table. Then come see me to see if there is anything else that needs to go on the table."

If we argue, do not argue back. Simply say, "I asked you to do this. I expect you to do it without arguing."

Give us a few minutes to wind down, and get any last arguments out of our system. Do not respond. If this doesn't work use natural consequences.

Responsibility for Clarity

Because of our honest confusion, it serves us very well in later life to be taught to always ask, "Is this what you wanted?" or "Am I finished now?" Learning this can prevent arguments and save our bacon.

Don't let us say, "I didn't know you wanted me to do that" or "You didn't tell me that." If we know we're likely to be confused, it is up to us to learn to compensate for this.

If we argue you didn't tell us something say, "When you are done with any task anyone gives you, you always have to go back to them to see if you are really done. This is always your responsibility."

Natural Consequences

A natural consequence is a result that flows naturally from an action. A punishment is something somebody decides to give. Because punishments involve a decision, it's easy for us to argue against this decision. It's harder for us to argue with the natural results of our actions.

If we've argued and haven't set the table, and you've been explicit, set it yourself. Then say, "I had a hard day today. I asked you to set the table. You didn't. I had to set it for you. Now I'm too tired for you to stay up late. You need to be in bed by 9 pm."

If you say we have to go to bed because we've been bad, we can argue this is unreasonable. If you say we have to go to bed because you're tired, we may try to argue. But we're in a much weaker position.

Arguing can take a lot of time. The natural consequence for arguing should be that you don't have time to do something we want.

Principles for Using Natural Consequences

Get information first. There may be mitigating circumstances for our behavior. Often we may not know the reasons for our behavior. We will get better explaining our reasons when we find emotions will be left out of conversations.

Natural consequences should impact us, not you. If you have to drive us to our friends to apologize, take the time spent driving us away from some other help you'd give us. Be reasonable, but do this.

It's OK to go overboard with natural consequences at first to get our attention. You can always take some away.

Give natural consequences without blame. They are simply the natural results of our actions.

Our actions always have natural consequences, which can affect you or us. In your family, whom is our behavior affecting now?

Don't Let Arguing Work

When we argue and win, we are learning that arguing works. We form patterns quickly that are hard to change. We should not learn a pattern of arguing.

If we have a good point, tell us you'll think about it and get back to us. If we continue to argue, use natural consequences. Say "When you argue, it wears me down and I have no energy to do things for you. When you argue, the answer will always be no."

The point is not to stop us from expressing our wants or needs. It's to stop us from arguing.

Model Better Ways of Meeting Our Needs

Arguing helps us meet our needs. If arguing stops working, we might come up with other inappropriate ways to meet them. Model talking, listening and helping others as better ways we can meet our needs. Ensure we understand we will not always get what we want.

Expect Results, Not Time

We can be good at working on our own goals. We can have difficulty working on goals others, such as parents, teachers, or bosses, set for us.

When working for others, we can confuse putting in time with getting results. To develop good work habits as adults, we need to learn both are important.

If we can start work and focus on a goal, our perseverance can kick in, and we can work for hours. Encourage this by focussing us on a small goal.

If we argue over work don't say, "Work on this task for 15 minutes." Say, "Work on this until you finish this part." With a goal, we won't look at a clock and argue for less time. We'll engage and learn good work habits.

Stick With It

These strategies take more thought than do arguing and punishments. Things might get worse before they get better. If you can find the energy and stick to your guns, I truly believe the rewards for you and your family will be worth the effort. ■

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