

TIPS FOR INCORPORATING *THOMAS & FRIENDS* INTO THE AUTISM CLASSROOM

Many students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) share a profile of strengths and challenges that can affect their classroom experiences and success. These students often have strengths in visual thinking, benefit from structure and routine, and have strong logical reasoning and analytical skills. Students with ASD also may have special interest areas (SIAs), like *Thomas & Friends*, which are both motivating and comforting. These same students, however, also present challenges that can impact their classroom success, including differences in their social interactions, sensory regulation, and behavior. Students with ASD can struggle with impulse control, flexibility, problem solving, and emotional regulation—all essential “executive functions” for the social and emotional development in young children. Classroom best practices for students with ASD take into account this constellation of strengths and differences.

Thomas & Friends is grounded in a social emotional curriculum and, in watching *Thomas & Friends*, all children can explore the concepts of listening, persistence, teamwork, and believing in one’s self. The *Thomas & Friends* series also offers educators a unique opportunity to support the development of these fundamental skills in their students with ASD, while also tapping into these students’ strengths and interests. This toolkit of materials offers educators activities and resources that are in line with best practices for supporting students with ASD.

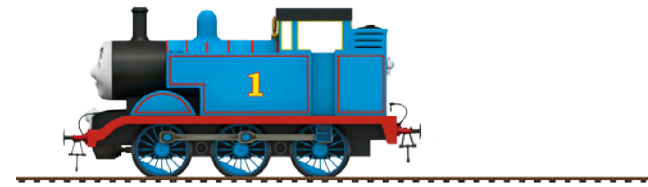
Here are some general guidelines for incorporating *Thomas & Friends* into the ASD classroom. Parents can also use these suggestions when their child is watching *Thomas & Friends* or playing with Thomas and his engine friends.

- **Set routines.** (*The trains of Sodor always run on a schedule.*) All children benefit from schedules and routines, and this is especially true for students with ASD. Simple daily routines can help a child with ASD feel comfortable by decreasing the fear of the unknown that can come with new transitions, allowing him/her to focus on tasks at hand and prepare for what’s ahead.
- **Use simple words.** (*Sir Topham Hatt is the manager of the North Western Railway and directs his trains across the island.*) In each episode, Sir Topham Hatt assigns his trains a simple task which often turns into an adventure. Short, descriptive words go a long way when giving directions. Some children with ASD can only follow one- or two-step directions, as they are easier to remember. They also benefit from concrete, literal language, where ambiguity is minimized. To help children succeed, keep it simple!
- **Use visuals.** Many children with ASD have visual strengths, and therefore benefit from the use of visuals in the classroom. Visual supports can serve as an explanation for what’s to come or a reminder of expectations. Drawings, Clipart™, or photos all make great visuals for organization and routines, and schedules can help explain a new situation.

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TIPS FOR INCORPORATING THOMAS & FRIENDS INTO THE AUTISM CLASSROOM CONTINUED

- **Name the feelings.** Children with ASD often have difficulty recognizing their own and others' emotions. Visuals of faces depicting each feeling can help with this, but a discussion about how the body feels with an emotion can be helpful too. (For example, when you are nervous, your stomach might hurt or you might feel a bit shaky.) From there, strategies to deal with the feelings can be discussed. Ask your students to pay close attention to Thomas' face. Ask questions such as: Can you tell how he is feeling from his expression?
- **Praise and encourage.** Remember that children with ASD might need extra encouragement to stay persistent. Verbal praise goes a long way! Be sure to “catch them doing something good,” offer specific praise that highlights what they're doing, and remind them how what they are doing helps to make them “*really useful engines!*”

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