

Classroom exercises to foster empathy

For elementary school students

We all have unique strengths and interests: Put a line of tape down the middle of the floor. Choose various statements and ask the students to split themselves up by facts such as who has blonde hair, who knows their alphabet, who can add $2 + 2$, who knows how to bake cookies. Then lead a discussion about differences and how all of us were born with interests and strengths. You can also lead a discussion about how the students feel when they do things they like or don't like to do. Relate this back to how students with autism might feel, and why they focus on some activities and have negative behaviors when faced with others.

We all want understanding and support: Describe a playground scenario in which they failed, such as missing a basket. Ask, "Who likes it when the other kids say, 'don't worry,' 'try again,' or 'you can do it'?" After they agree these are good responses, ask, "Who likes it when the other kids say 'that was terrible,' or 'why did you do that?'" Also ask how they feel when their peers react with gestures, laughing, or rolling their eyes. Then you can lead a discussion on encouraging words and not teasing others. Comment on the fact that even though everyone has different abilities and strengths, we are the same in one basic way: we want others to understand and support us.

Create a collage of unique abilities: Have the students create collages from magazines to illustrate their special skills or interests. Use these to lead a discussion about children with autism also having skills and interests, many of which overlap with the students' on their collages. Each of us is different. The finished projects would make a great bulletin board or hallway display, too!

For elementary or middle school students

Understanding challenges: Set up centers with beads, strings, and very large, thick work gloves. Instruct the students to string the beads while wearing the gloves. Explain that they are experiencing how it would feel if their hands worked differently. Ask the students to think about what tasks might be harder if they had poor fine motor skills. Would they need any special kind of assistance? Ask them to think about the feelings they have when they must do things that are difficult or just not fun. This is to help students understand why some of their friends with Autism Spectrum Disorder may yell, cry, or throw things.

For middle school students

We all learn differently: On a desk, place about a dozen miscellaneous items, including a fork, spoon, plate, and cup. Choose a student to sit in front of the items and then, in another language they do not know, tell them to set the table. Do not also say it in English – the point is to confuse them. (If you do not know any other languages, you can make up words, but make it sound realistic.) When they don't respond, repeat the instructions slowly, then loudly, then more simply. Act impatient. Eventually, pull out a drawing of how to set a table. If the student is still confused, point to the picture, the elements, and the table to indicate which item goes where. When the student sets the table, praise the student and have the class applaud. Then ask (in English!) why they didn't follow the instructions in the first place. Didn't they hear what you said? Use this to lead a discussion about how people with autism are visual learners and often cannot process spoken language, even if it is their own. Also discuss how everyone learns differently, but they are still learning. They are different, not less.