Small Changes, Great Gains
Adapting Morning Meeting to Help Children with Autism

by Lauri Pepe Bousquet, with Elizabeth Nash

(This is an expanded version of the printed article.)

There’s a happy buzz in Mr. M’s third grade class. It’s late fall, and the children take pride in knowing just what to do as their school day begins. First, there’s the morning message their teacher has written for them. The children gather at the easel a few at a time to read the message and respond to their teacher’s social studies question: “What’s your favorite rainforest animal?” As other children write their responses, Lisa quietly says to her classmate Mark, a child with autism, “This is where you put your picture,” as she points to a space at the bottom of the chart. Mark presses a small picture of an anaconda against a loop of tape that Mr. M. has placed on the chart for him. He then makes his way to the meeting area and settles onto his carpet square. Holding a small, soft ball that helps him stay calm and focused, Mark is ready for Morning Meeting.

Morning Meeting, a structured daily routine that builds community and helps children develop key social skills (see the box below), can be of particular help to children with autism. Like Mark, these children often struggle with classroom participation. As much as they might want to engage with classmates, autism can make that engagement difficult and stressful. And their sensory world can be a chaotic one, in which it’s hard to sort out all the messages coming in from their environment. (Learn more about autism in the box below.)

Morning Meeting provides much-needed predictability for children with autism, while also building the sort of compassionate, tolerant, and inclusive classroom community in which they can participate successfully. The meeting structure gives these children important daily practice in using positive social behaviors with their classmates, while also offering structured opportunities for classmates to get to know and learn to communicate with them.

But as helpful as the structured routine of Morning Meeting is to children with autism, some key adaptations can make it even more
helpful. I’d like to share some adaptations I’ve gathered from my own practice and from other teachers. These adaptations focus on easing typical classroom challenges for children with autism: communicating verbally; using social cues to understand classmates’ thoughts, feelings, and intentions; initiating or responding to typical social interactions; and managing changes in routine and transitions from one activity to another.

**Preparing for Morning Meeting**

Set up your meeting space so that it’s very obvious where to go for meeting and what to do once there. This predictability calms and reassures children with autism and bolsters their self-confidence by helping them participate independently. Because these children often find written and spoken language difficult to understand, visual cues are key to helping them participate.

- Always meet in the same clearly defined place (and always, if possible, at the same time). Many teachers use a rug, carpet squares, or a circle of chairs to define the meeting area. Adding a poster or a sign that the children illustrate with a picture of themselves at meeting could further help the child with autism understand where to go at meeting time. Marking each child’s spot on the meeting rug with masking tape can also be helpful.
- In the first weeks of school, tape children’s names or photos to a spot in the meeting circle. If, as the year progresses, you decide to offer the children choices in where they sit, you can still continue this support for the child with autism, if necessary.
- A week before you introduce a new Morning Meeting greeting, activity, or type of sharing, teach it to the child separately so that he or she has plenty of time to practice with you or another adult at school or at home. This will help alleviate the child’s discomfort with having to do something new during meeting.
- At the start of the year, when you’re just introducing Morning Meeting, have the child practice the components with an adult outside of meeting before attending a real meeting with classmates. The child may also benefit from watching a video of Morning Meeting.

**Greeting**

Because the child with autism may have trouble communicating verbally, greetings that can accommodate nonverbal responses make participation much easier. Children with autism may also need help knowing how to respond when someone speaks to them.

- Let the child greet classmates by showing their photos instead of saying their names. One way to do this is to make a photo collection of all the child’s classmates. Punch the photos and put them on a ring that the child can bring to meeting. Another option is to give the child a card for each classmate with that classmate’s name and picture on it. Be sure to tell the class that the child with
autism will be using a nonverbal way of greeting them, but that they will respond in words. Model this and give the children opportunities to practice.

- If you use photo cards, you can add a sentence template saying, for example, “Good morning, ____.” or “Hello, _________!” The child then completes the sentence by pasting on a picture of the classmate he or she wishes to greet and showing the card to that classmate.

- Making eye contact, a social skill that lets people know we’re listening and paying attention to them, can be very difficult and uncomfortable for children with autism. Model this for the child by looking at the child’s eyes for a few seconds, looking away, looking at the child’s eyes again, etc. If the child continues to struggle with eye contact, suggest looking between other people’s eyes or anywhere on their faces.

- If the child uses a switch (an assistive technology device with prerecorded messages that a child with verbal impairment can push to "talk" for him or her), record a message that says “Good morning!”

Sharing

Sharing is the most intensely social of the four Morning Meeting components. Practicing specific skills in advance with adults at school or home will help the child with autism share more comfortably. Coaching classmates on how to respond to the child’s sharing is also important.

- During your first few Morning Meetings, have all the children share with just one other person, rather than with the whole group. To reduce distractions, invite the child and his or her sharing partner to step away from the meeting circle while they share.

- Using words or pictures, make cue cards to help the child review the steps of sharing before his or her turn: “I look around and smile at my friends. I use a big voice and tell them about something important to me ...” or “I hold up a picture that shows something important to me ...”

- Model for classmates how to look at and speak directly to the child with autism, even if the child shares by holding up pictures or using an electronic voice output system or other communication tool.

- If possible, videotape the children as they share. Review the tape with the child and talk about body language (nodding, facial expressions, eye contact, and other nonverbal social responses that Morning Meeting teaches).

- To help the child stay calm and focused, let him or her hold a favorite object while sharing.
• If the child is not ready for sharing with a partner or the group, give him or her a “sharing job” that will require a comfortable level of engagement: Watch the clock to keep the group on schedule, check off students’ names as they do their sharing, etc.

**Group Activity**

Morning Meeting activities, which often involve singing or chanting coordinated with movements, can be daunting for children with autism. The sounds and motions may overwhelm their sensory systems, and they may struggle with making the movements in a smooth and coordinated way. Preparation and practice help a great deal. So does finding ways to incorporate visual cues and responses.

• At the start of the year, choose activities involving poems and stories, rather than those involving movement. Have the child practice with you or with another adult at school or at home.

• To accommodate the child’s preference for symbols or pictures versus words, make picture sheets for songs, with symbols or pictures replacing major words. You can do this by hand or with software such as Boardmaker® that helps teachers create picture-based communication systems for children with autism.

• If you have a video camera, videotape your class doing a movement activity. The child can then view the activity and practice the movements before doing them “for real” with classmates. Or let a child not yet ready to join in the activity itself participate by filming his or her classmates doing the activity.

• Set incremental goals: Have the child begin by joining in on the last line of a poem or song. Week by week, gradually increase the child’s participation.

• For older children, “Pass the Compliment” is a simple activity that helps the child with autism focus on classmates. One or two students each day (chosen the week before) receive compliments from each of the other students. You preview the compliments for all the children and, if necessary, help the child with autism practice saying his or her compliment or perhaps making a picture to represent it.

• “Paper Bag Interview” is another good activity that enables the child with autism to prepare and practice. Children gather in groups and you give each group a paper bag into which you’ve placed a slip of paper on which you’ve written a question on a topic the children will enjoy discussing together, such as “What’s your favorite music group?” (The bag isn’t essential; it simply heightens the sense of mystery and excitement.) Choosing the groupings and questions in advance enables you to give the child with autism time to practice some responses before the meeting.

See how a special education teacher suggests modifying the "Ball Toss" greeting and the "Just Like Me" activity to better support a child with autism in the box below.

**Morning Message**

Although children with autism often struggle to interpret and respond to written words,
they can still engage with the message if you give them a little extra support before and during the meeting.

- Write each day’s message on paper the day before and let the child practice reading it with you or other adults at school or at home.
- Have a buddy read the message to or with the child.
- To limit open-ended choices (which may be difficult for these children) and accommodate the child’s preference for visual information, find two pictures that could be responses to each question you plan to ask children to answer on the message. The child chooses one picture as his or her response and tapes or pastes it to the message chart.
- Write your morning messages on a white board and let the child respond to questions by using photo or picture magnets.
- Include questions that ask for drawings instead of written responses. For example, “Draw a picture of your pet [favorite animal, house].”
- When you read the message with the whole group, point to each word so that the child can more easily follow along.
- To help reduce visual distractions, cover the message with a sheet of blank paper so that only the first line of the message shows. As you read with the children, uncover the rest of the message one line at a time.

Transitioning from Morning Meeting into the School Day

Changing from one activity to another can be stressful and confusing for children with autism. Alerting them in advance that meeting is about to end helps ease them out of meeting and on into the day.

- Explain to the child that you will be setting a timer five minutes before the meeting is to end and will signal to her or him that you have done so. Tell the child that when the timer goes off, meeting is over, and make sure that he or she knows what to do at that point.
- If the child needs more than the five-minute signal, try using an hourglass to give him or her a more concrete representation of the time passing.
- Make a chart with pictures representing each of the four meeting components. Check off each component as you complete it to give the child a more concrete sense of where you are in the meeting and when the meeting will end. Including on the chart (in words or pictures) the activity that will immediately follow will further ease the child’s transition out of meeting.

Building Skills, Encouraging Participation

Morning Meeting helps all children develop the academic and social skills essential to learning, while having fun with each other in a safe and structured way. With small, manageable adaptations like the ones described here, Morning Meeting can be an even more powerful tool for helping a child with autism develop key social skills and become a participating member of your classroom community.

Lauri Pepe Bousquet is a professor of education at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York. She has taught for thirty-one years and has been a Responsive Classroom consulting teacher for fifteen years. Lauri would like to thank Laura Thurston, special education teacher, and Amy Dixon, first grade teacher, for their contributions to this article.

Elizabeth Nash is a staff editor and writer at Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.
Autism, a neurological disorder affecting a person’s ability to communicate and interact with others, usually appears during the first three years of life. There is no single known cause and no known cure.

Characteristics common to autism are difficulties with communication, movement, sensory awareness, and thinking and remembering.

- Communication: Trouble speaking and understanding figurative language, trouble deciphering spoken language, a marked preference for visual over auditory information
- Movement: Tendency to make repetitive movements such as rocking, pacing, or hand flapping
- Sensory awareness: May be heightened (which makes crowded or noisy environments upsetting or even painful) or diminished (which hinders responses to danger or pain)
- Thinking: Fascination with one particular topic almost to the exclusion of others; may not comprehend abstract concepts or emotional content
- Memory: May have trouble following multistep directions

Autism is called a “spectrum disorder” because it affects individuals differently: Any two people with autism will likely have different characteristics of the disorder, or they may have the same characteristics but at a different level of severity. For example, some people with autism do not speak at all and find day-to-day activities severely challenging. Others are highly verbal and quite successful in their daily lives, especially with understanding and support.

In addition to difficulties with verbal communication, here are other key classroom challenges for students with autism:

- Using social cues to understand classmates’ thoughts, feelings, and intentions
- Initiating or responding to typical social interactions
- Managing changes in routine and transitions from one activity to another

Morning Meeting, a key element of the Responsive Classroom approach, builds community and creates a positive climate for learning. During this daily 20- to 30-minute routine, children practice the academic skills they’re currently working on and learn social skills such as listening, speaking, and group participation.

Ideally, all meetings contain the same components in the same order and take place in the same classroom spot at the beginning of each school day. Gathered in a circle, children and adults greet each other, share personal news, do a group activity, and look forward to the day ahead through their teacher’s written message to them.

The positive tone set in the meeting creates the context not just for that single day in the classroom but for the children’s broader understanding of school as a community of caring and respectful learners.

Learn more with The Morning Meeting Book and other Morning Meeting resources.

Sample Modifications for a greeting and an activity

Thanks to special education teacher Laura A. Thurston for providing these examples of how to adapt a greeting and activity to better support a child with autism.

Ball Toss Greeting
In this simple greeting, each student greets another (“Good morning, Gretchen”) and then throws, rolls, or bounces a soft ball to the greeted child. The greeted child returns the greeting, greets another child, and tosses the ball to that child.

Adapting for a child with autism ...

- The child chooses a classmate to greet by selecting a photo from a photo ring and holding it up so the classmate can see it. The child then tosses the ball to that classmate.
- If the child has difficulty with physical coordination, create a “catch board” to help the child catch the ball tossed by a classmate. Glue a good-sized patch of Velcro to a piece of cardboard and use a tennis ball (its fuzzy surface will stick well to the Velcro). Of course, it’s fine if other children also want to use the board!
“Just Like Me” Group Activity

This activity helps a class (or any group of people) get to know each other. A leader makes a series of statements about traits, preferences, activities, families, etc. For example, the leader might say “I love chocolate ice cream” All group members who love chocolate ice cream or stand up and say “Just like me!” Then the leader might say, “My favorite season is spring.” Everyone who shares that preference stands and says, “Just like me!” After ten or so statements, the group reflects briefly on what they have in common.

Adapting for a child with autism ...

- Make (or help the child make) a large “Just like me!” button or sign. The child holds up the button or sign while standing to show agreement with a statement.
- Let the child blow softly on a whistle or ring a bell to indicate “Just like me.”
- Plan the statements you’re going to use ahead of time and make them into a book. A typical entry would look like this:

  I like ______________.

Work with the child to choose one or two pictures that fit the statement for him or her. Each time you do the activity, the child can add a picture or two for each statement. This will build the child’s repertoire of responses and encourage independent participation as the year progresses. The book also makes a great resource for other activities, such as writing workshop.

- If physical movement is problematic for the child, avoid the repeated standing and sitting by teaching “Just Like Me” as a seated activity. Instead of standing, everyone makes a hand movement or other gesture while saying “Just Like Me!”

Photo 1 © Alice Proujansky. All rights reserved.
Photos 2 & 3 © Peter Wrenn. All rights reserved.