What I would have wanted my Jewish Educator to know as an Autistic Student

Exclusive MATAN Webinar

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A little about me...

- Lived in Jersey City for 2 Years; moved to Rockland County
- Diagnosed with Autism at Age 2
- Began various therapies including Play-Based ABA
- Spent my Pre-K alternating between Synagogue Pre-K and A Starting Place
- Participated in a special program at Bardonia Elementary

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A little about me…

- Went to Ramah Nyack from Kochavim (going into Kindergarten) until Nevonim (Going into 5th Grade)
- Went to RJA from 1st-4th Grade
- I had challenges on multiple fronts at RJA; aided with support including from MATAN.
- Death of my father added additional challenges.

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A little about me...

- Attended Schechter Bergen from 5th-8th grade. Received additional help but began to develop the important skill of self-advocacy.
- Camper at Ramah Poconos from 2017-2021 (entering 5th-9th Grade)
- Diagnosed with Anxiety in 6th Grade.
- Struggled with Math and Judaics due to a variety of factors including Hybrid Learning.
- Reached out to MATAN about a potential teen blog in Spring 2021.

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A little about me…

- Attending Leffell School, Freshman Year to Present.
- Improving Judaics and Math due to supportive teachers, return to in-person and additional effort/support outside of class.
- Wrote my first blog of MATAN's award-winning Words of Wisdom blogs in September 2021.
- Began public speaking in JDAIM 2022.

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So what are we covering?

Let’s talk about the do’s and don’ts of how to be an inclusive Jewish educator. This may cover somethings you may already know, but I will be giving some advice as an Autistic student explaining my own experience.

These tips also apply well to counselors, parents and clergy.

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Do:

Treat every student as an individual.

No one student is the same as another. No neurotypical, neurodivergent or Autistic student is the same.

If a student is struggling or having difficulties, I highly recommend setting up an individual meeting with the parent and or the student (age-appropriately).

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Do Not:

Give Pop-Quizzes (at least in the traditional manner).

While this can be an important way to assess student ability, it can also be especially difficult and stressful to some Autistic students or students with anxiety. A good alternative is to do what my current hebrew teacher does. Tell students that there will be a pop-quiz sometime during a certain time window (week, etc).

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Do:

Give breaks to your students.

Everyone, especially students with Autism or another condition such as ADHD need breaks to stay productive.

Take the example of my History Teacher last year. He would give us a five minute break during our 70 minute periods. During good weather he even encouraged us to go outside!

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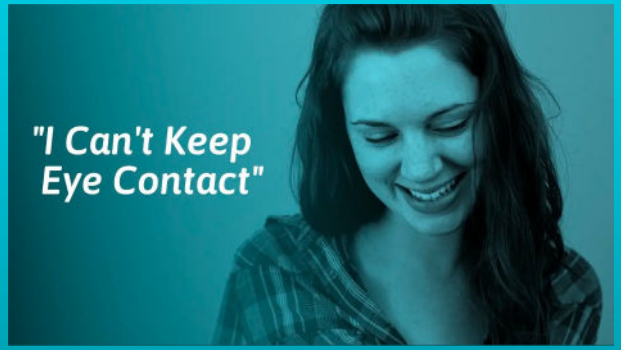
Do Not:

Punish Students for not giving Eye Contact

For some students, not giving eye contact IS a sign that they are not paying attention. But for some students, especially Autistic ones, Eye Contact is difficult and they actually may be paying more attention if they are looking at something else. It is important to ask your own students what is best for them to pay attention.



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Do:

Allow students to doodle or fidget

The most common teacher mistake is to not allow doodling or fidgeting. Allow it! (As long as it is not distracting). In fact, many students benefit from these concentration strategies and I recommend having available fidgets to use in your classroom.

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Do Not:

Cold Call

Not everyone will learn from a cold call. Some students, may feel nervous or anxious answering questions without raising their hands. You also never know what a student may be going through with their day. I usually answer questions in class but during a hard day a cold call is not helpful. A good alternative is to ask a question to the entire class and have everyone answer via a service like google classroom.

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Do:

Watch out for insulting language.

You are probably thinking about the R*tard word, however, nowadays a new harmful joke and stereotype is taking root among students. Many kids now joke that a stupid or annoying behavior is “really autistic” or that a tic or an annoying sound should be called an “autistic screech”. Do not shame students. Explain how these words can be hurtful.

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Do Not:

Reveal someone's diagnosis

Not everyone is comfortable with having their diagnosis revealed. Please be mindful of that. If someone asks why a student is having a hard time just explain either that they are having a hard day or that a certain thing is hard for them. Remind students to treat all equally and fairly and to not start rumors or pick on others.

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Do:

Be mindful of how group projects are assigned.

Some students may have a hard time creating long lasting friendships that will want to group up with them. However, assigned groups at random can be difficult too. Have a google form in advance asking students to name three people they would work best with. This can help you meaningfully assign groups.

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Do Not:

Play an extremely loud video or video with flashing lights.

Some of the most common sensory issues is loud noises and flashing lights. To be inclusive make sure to avoid these in your class. Make sure to encourage students to keep a low volume not just out of respect for the classroom but for others as well. Also, create a calm down corner (or locate one in your school) in your classroom to let students decompress.

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Do:

Find inclusive ways to include students in Judaism

1. Find ways to engage students in Sensory-friendly experiences.

1. Connect Judaism to topics that interest students who love a specific topic.
2. Sometimes food can be a great way to connect people! We want to be sure that allergies and other food sensitivities are being considered.

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Do Not:

Assume that everyone learns the same

Because everyone learns differently! At the beginning of the year give your students a questionnaire. What comes easy to you? What is more difficult for you? This can help you get a grasp of how your students learn. Make sure to also meet with your students and ask them what is easy and hard for them to do.

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Do:

Be Clear in your Communication

If a major or even minor change is about to occur in your classroom or school be sure to be clear in your communication. Provide advance notice especially because Autistic students or students who have anxiety may have difficult with short notice. If you know that you may be out during a specific window of time, communicate that in advance with your students.

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Do Not:

Judge.

Ever heard the saying “don’t judge a book by its cover”. I love this saying. I have gotten glances or stares in the past for my autistic behaviors or my reactions to certain sensory or social situations. One way to make Autistic people included is to just not judge!

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Do:

Ask Questions!

This is a great way to not only gauge learning but to learn more about your students. Making assumptions about someone is never the answer, your question will not only convey how you take your students seriously but your students answers could give you a new insight.

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