

What is this all about?

Is it a toy?

Can we eat it?

Is it soft?

Is it red?

It's New!

??

When

# New Things Are Exciting

Natalia Arredondo

**D**ifficulty coping with newness and change is a recurring issue in students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). These issues interfere with the stability and predictability of their worlds, and often provoke increased levels of anxiety and stress that can be debilitating. (Grandin, 2006) Introducing new equipment, procedures, academic concepts, and even games and toys may present a real challenge to these students, often affecting their ability to participate and learn. Curriculum is the medium for teaching, yet curricula addressing common challenges such as newness and change are largely absent. More often the focus is on using behavioral strategies to reduce impeding behavior while ignoring the potential of curriculum to accomplish that goal.

I teach in the Intensive Kindergarten, a program for students on the autism spectrum housed within two New York City public schools. The purpose of this program is to help students develop the skills needed to function well in an inclusion class the following school year. I've had many students who were fearful about newness and change, so I created a thematic unit that focuses on the concept of "New Things." I'm providing the detailed unit, together with examples of success, to demonstrate the possibility of using curriculum to remediate core issues of children on the spectrum.

#### Day 1

##### Teacher preparation:

- Inform parents about this unit shortly before it is started and identify the day when their child is invited to bring a novel toy or other interesting object to school.
- Obtain a box in which to hide new objects and prepare materials for decorating the box.
- Select a novel toy and place it in the box that will be used as the "New Things Box."
- Prepare examples of questions to model for the students during the lesson.

**Topic introduction:** "Today we are going to talk about things that are new to us. Something that we see or do for the first time, that we didn't know before, is new." Then the teacher states, "When something is new to me I ask myself, 'What is this all about?'"

**Activity description:** The teacher holds up the box and tells the students that there is a "new thing" hidden in the box. She prompts the students to ask questions about what's inside the box. Another staff member models how to ask such questions (e.g., "Is it a toy?" "Is it hard or soft?" "Can we eat it?"), and then adds, "I wonder what the new thing is all about?" After the children have asked several questions, the teacher opens the box as she sings and dances a little jig to increase the fun as the students wait to see the "new thing." Once the toy is revealed the teacher passes it around and the second adult models making comments about it and encourages children to do the same.

**Hands-on:** The students take turns decorating the "New Things Box."

**Reflection/Closing:** The teacher states, "Today you all asked me questions about the new thing in the box. I liked that, and I liked what you told me about the new thing after we took it out of the box. New things can be exciting and fun." Then give children an opportunity to contribute their own reflections on the lesson. The teacher will make this toy available for students to use during center time.

#### Day 2

##### Teacher preparation:

- Select a second novel toy or other object that will be of interest to the students and hide it in the New Things Box.
- Prepare a chart to use with the students for reviewing the experiences they have had each day during the unit.



Who would like to learn what this new thing is all about?

New things can be exciting and fun!



Topic introduction: Same as on Day 1.

Activity description: The second staff member takes over direction of the lesson and follows the same procedure as on Day 1.

Hands-on: The staff member asks, "Who would like to learn what this new thing is all about?" She proceeds to have students take turns exploring the object as they pass it around. The teacher not presenting the lesson models making comments about the new object, "Where did you get it? "How do you use it?" "I like the music it makes."

Reflection/Closing: The teacher reflects on the students' responses to the new object and says, "New things can be exciting and fun." The children are then given an opportunity to contribute their own reflections on the lesson.

### Days 3 and On

These lessons will take place as a new routine during morning meeting. Each student will be given the opportunity to bring a new toy or other interesting object from home. The teacher will help the child hide the new object in the "New Things Box" and will find out if the child is familiar with the object.

Topic introduction: The teacher says, "Today is Tom's turn to bring something new to us. It's new to us because it's not

something we have in the classroom and this is the first time that Tom brought it to school." (If the object is known to Tom, the teacher adds, "This is not new to Tom because he has used it before so he knows all about it, but it's new to us.") Then the teacher states, "When something is new to me I ask myself, 'What is this all about?'"

Modeling/Activity explanation: When the morning meeting takes place the student who brought in the toy or other object will pass the box around to the other students. Teachers and students will ask questions about the object in the box. The student who brought in the object will open the box after everybody sings and/or dances as on the previous days.

Hands-on: Same as on Day 2.

Reflection/Closing: Same as on Day 2.

Closing Day, "Old Things" Celebration To provide closure to this unit, the last session will focus on looking back on the different toys and other novel objects that the students brought to school and explored.

Teacher preparation:

- Gather the charts and objects used during this unit.
- Bring snacks for the celebration to share in the classroom.

Topic introduction: "Today we are again going to look at the toys and other objects that you brought to school to share with us when they were new to the class. When they were new to us we asked ourselves, 'What is this all about?' But these things are not new to us anymore. They are now *familiar* to us. Familiar means that we know all about them. Sometimes when things are familiar to us we call them *old*. So today we will have a celebration of the things we brought to school and explored and we will call them "Old Things."

Modeling/Activity explanation: The teacher reads the charts with the students as they look at the corresponding objects. The students take turns commenting.

Reflection/Closing: The teacher asks the students to identify their favorite things and share their thoughts about them as she invites them to have some treats at the "Old Things Celebration." She concludes by saying, "New things can be exciting and fun."

Extension of the Unit:

### Generalization to Other Situations in School and Home

The basic tools used in this unit can easily be applied in most any circumstance where students with autism must deal with newness and change. Some examples include, new person in the classroom, new field trip, new clothing, and new item of furniture at home. When a new situation arises the teacher (or parent) primes the child by saying, "When something is new to me I ask myself, 'What is this all about?'" and the child is encouraged to ask questions or make comments about the new experience. The child is also reminded that, "New things can be exciting and fun."

### Success with "New Things"

Prior to implementing this unit, most of the students in the Intensive Kindergarten had substantial difficulty dealing with newness; crying and refusing to participate were common student responses. However, as the thematic unit proceeded, students started to react more favorably

to newness, with difficult behaviors being replaced by questions and comments. For example, when a new phonics curriculum was introduced a student who was about to start crying asked the teacher, "Is this a new thing?" to which the teacher excitedly responded, "Yes it is!" and added, "Would you like to dance our jig for new things?" Immediately the student changed her sad expression to a timid smile as she said, "Yes, I like that this is a new thing," and she danced. When this girl dealt positively with that new situation, she served as a model for the other students who joined in dancing.

By the time this unit was completed, students looked forward to experiencing newness. For example, after learning all the letters of the alphabet and corresponding sounds, a student commented, "We don't have any new letters to learn. I want more new letters." The teacher responded, "We don't have any new letters to learn but we will learn the sounds that some letters make when they are together, and that's something new," to which the student replied while jumping and cheering, "We have another new thing."

Children's responses at home also changed. After the end of this unit, some of the parents shared information about how their children were coping with newness at home. One parent reported,

"It is amazing that my son tried three new things this weekend. First, he asked me if he could go with his dad and his dad's friends for brunch just to try something new. He had never asked me that before. I would not even have dared to think that he would ask me for something that could be so unpredictable. He also asked me if I could take him to a new playground. He said he just wanted to try something new. When I took him to the playground he told me, 'This playground is OK but I like my old playground better.' And he also said he wanted to try a new vegetable. He tried cauliflower and didn't like it, but at least he tried it."

I've been excited and encouraged by our experience using the "New Things" curricula. It has become a great tool that expands our educational approach to helping students with ASD function more productively inside – and outside – the classroom. In our school system we're exploring how to implement the units more broadly and new units are being developed. I hope our experience contributes to your success as well. ■

Natalia Arredondo is dedicated to developing programs to help ASD students. She thanks Professor Shirley Cohen from Hunter College for her contributions and guidance. Natalia has worked with Professor Cohen and two other consultants to the Intensive Kindergarten to develop a manual for the program.

#### References

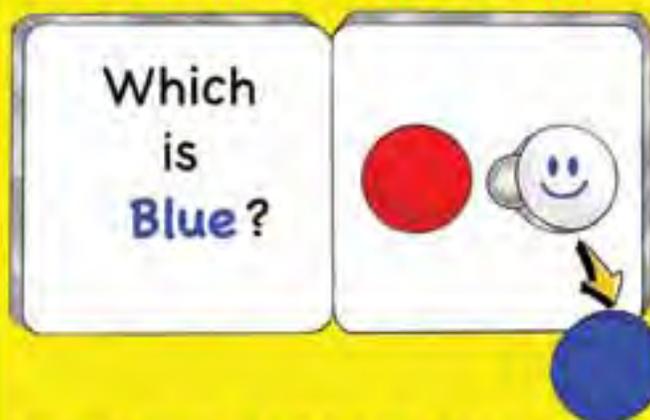
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