

STRAIGHT TALK *About* **Autism**

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The Flexroom *Supporting Inclusion and School Success*

Part Two of a Two-Part Article

In part one of this article, I discussed the reasons why use of a Flexroom is an important adjunct to a school-based educational program for students with ASD. In this article I will address specific characteristics and guidelines for use of the Flexroom, followed by examples of its use in practice.

Physical and Social Characteristics of the Flexroom

Flexrooms may share similar characteristics and serve a range of common functions across schools; however, individual Flexrooms should be designed to meet the needs of the specific students served. With these important parameters in mind, Flexrooms should be designed to offer:

1. **A lower-stimulus environment with fewer people** – It is well accepted that for most students with ASD, a busy, overly stimulating environment is problematic. In order for a Flexroom to serve as an emotionally-regulating alternative to a typical classroom, gym, or cafeteria, it is important that it be a calmer and less busy space. It is also helpful to divide the space into various sections for different activities (e.g., academic, social, solitary play). Natural dividers such as bookshelves or actual room dividers may be used to create lower-stimulus areas.
2. **A more relaxed environment, with less-stringent rules than the classroom, but less “chaos” than the school cafeteria** – Most classrooms—especially those beyond the early childhood years—typically require students to follow the rules of social behavior. This is “automatic” for typical students, but it can be extremely challenging for students with ASD. While being able to follow simple social rules is an important indicator of progress for students with ASD, learning to do so in the regular classroom is difficult.

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Having said that, since the Flexroom is a place where social rules are more relaxed it not only can serve as a “safe haven,” but also provide an ideal environment for slower-paced social learning. For example, a Flexroom should be a place where the student can get up and move about as needed; where “alone time” is more acceptable; where more choices are available for participating in activities; and where there are fewer demands to follow specific rules or activities. For older students, a Flexroom may be seen as a place to “hang-out” to relax and connect with other students at designated times during, or at the end of, the school day.

3. **Areas for movement / exercise** – Except for early childhood classrooms, most classrooms have limited or no space for movement and exercise. A Flexroom should be designed to provide such opportunities, and ideally would include sensory-motor equipment such as a suspended swing or therapy balls, and a gym mat for movement activities and exercise. When “reverse mainstreaming” is an option, typical classmates may join students in small-group (e.g., three-four students), fun activities that provide movement and exercise.
4. **Spaces designed for activities that range from academic support to fun activities** – As noted, Flexrooms should have well-defined spaces for different activities. It is important that a student comes to associate each space with a purpose. For example, in a recent consult for a school that is developing a Flexroom, I observed that there were bookshelves packed with books throughout the room,

giving the impression that academic work was the primary function of the room. The staff redesigned the room to more clearly demarcate the functions each area was to serve so as to clarify the use of each space for the students.

Guidelines for Use of the Flexroom

1. Identify functions or purposes for the specific student. Each student should have an individualized, designated plan for how to use the Flexroom under proactive and reactive circumstances. Proactive use involves following a plan to provide regular visits for special learning activities and to support a well-regulated emotional state. Reactive use involves unplanned visits to the room when a student is feeling challenged and is experiencing considerable levels of emotional dysregulation which may result in problem behavior.
2. For proactive use, identify regularly scheduled times during the school day to visit for purposes such as academic support, social skills activities, or emotional regulation “refueling breaks.” Try to coordinate use with natural blocks of time in the student’s schedule. Also, try to avoid leaving or returning to the regular classroom in the middle of a lesson or activity, as this may cause additional confusion or stress for the student, and it should not be necessary when a plan for proactive use is in place.
3. For reactive, “in the heat of the moment” use, identify in advance the specifics regarding the behavioral threshold for bringing a student to the Flexroom, or offering him or her a “get away” break. In other words, what degree of dysregulation, as noted by specific behavioral indicators, would the student need to evidence before having to leave classroom activities and be taken to the Flexroom? Likewise, determine the behavioral threshold (i.e., signs of readiness) for bringing the student back to the classroom. In addition, identify areas and activities in the room that could be made available if needed on a reactive basis, and be sure to have available visual supports and safety procedures should they be needed.
4. Ensure that the student either has the ability to request a break, or is being taught how to do so. In teaching this important skill, it is important to underscore that the mode of communication targeted must be appropriate to the student’s abilities and developmental level.
5. Be mindful of “longitudinal issues” which may necessitate use of the Flexroom as a supplemental environment for greater portions of the day if events and circumstances

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within the classroom result in increased levels of dysregulation. These events or circumstances may vary greatly, and may be instigated by events beyond the school setting. For example, changes resulting from parental separation, illness, onset of puberty, a move to a new home, or settling in to a new school year may also cause students to become dysregulated.

Concerns/Challenges Regarding the Flexroom Model

In my experience, there are a number of predictable concerns that parents and/or professionals have raised about the introduction and use of a Flexroom. A few of these follow, along with responses to them:

1. **The student will “overuse” the Flexroom to get out of work** – The student’s team should set clear guidelines for use of the Flexroom so that its use is predictable to the student. I have found that, in contrast to “getting out of work,” students will often be more productive in the Flexroom, since the environment is specifically designed to be conducive to learning.
2. **The student will miss important work in the regular classroom** – With attention to detail and implementation of clear policies for use, a Flexroom can provide the ancillary emotional regulation support needed to “fortify” the student for the more complex classroom environment, and enable him or her to be more available for learning and engagement.
3. **It is too difficult to coordinate the use of a Flexroom, considering staff time and the number of students to be served** – When a school makes the commitment to provide a Flexroom, there is no doubt that coordination of its use is a complex issue and must be prioritized. However, in my experience, such complexity is nothing compared to problems that staff, students, and families face when this type of environment is unavailable.
4. **Use of a Flexroom may be seen as reinforcing negative behavior** - A major purpose of the Flexroom is to provide a less stressful environment for a student. When used in a proactive manner, problem behavior will decrease over time. Without such an alternative, a student under high levels of stress is much more likely to experience “fight or flight” reactions. It is important to remember that ASD is a neurologically-based disability that places a student at high

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risk for stress, and that this sometimes results in problem behavior, especially in high-stimulation environments.

5. **Parents won't understand as they want their child in the mainstream for the maximum amount of time** - It is important that parents be fully informed about the uses of a Flexroom, as this may go a long way toward minimizing concerns and obtaining their approval for documenting Flexroom use in the IEP. With such understanding, the great majority of parents I have collaborated with are supportive. It also is important that staff provide parents with evidence of the benefits of the Flexroom once it is implemented.

Examples of Flexroom Use

Rosie is a second grade student who spends the majority of her day in the regular classroom. At the beginning of the school year, she had difficulty settling into her class of 25 students first thing in the morning. Her team felt that Rosie needed a quieter and calmer environment to get her day off to a good start. Hence, the Flexroom was used to provide 20 minutes of morning-meeting time for Rosie and three other students. This proved to be effective in helping her to regulate emotionally and transition to her regular classroom. After a month, Rosie was able to transition from the school bus to her regular class with relative ease. Notwithstanding, the Flexroom was used as an option on those rare occasions when Rosie experienced transition difficulty. Under these circumstances, she was able to make a choice through the use of visuals regarding whether to go directly to her classroom or to the Flexroom. For the remainder of the school year, Rosie went to the Flexroom proactively mid-morning and mid-afternoon for academic support and emotional regulation breaks. On rare occasions, the Flexroom was used on a reactive basis when it was apparent that the level of stimulation in the classroom was becoming overwhelming for Rosie.

Jessie is a middle school student who uses a speech-generating device as his primary mode of communication. In his prior elementary school placement in another district, he participated primarily in one-to-one adult-directed activities in a small self-contained classroom, due to the extent of his learning difficulties and his emotional regulation challenges. Compliance training was a major focus of his program, with less of a focus on enhancing social communication. In his previous school, challenging behavior that was, at times,

harmful to him and others, was the justification for not providing inclusive opportunities.

Jessie's new school district has a greater commitment to including students with ASD, so his school schedule is largely predicated on the use of a Flexroom. In this environment, Jessie and students from his regular homeroom participate in a number of activities throughout the day including a settling-in routine in the morning, and during lunch, recess, gym, music, and other specials. The Flexroom is also used to provide Jessie with functional academic support in one-to-one and small-group activities, and includes reverse mainstreaming opportunities with students from his homeroom who come into the Flexroom to exercise and participate in social skills activities. The Flexroom also includes a snack store where Jessie and two other students sell snacks and drinks to other students and school faculty. Finally, Jessie has two school-wide jobs—recycling paper and delivering mail—which he carries out with one or two typical classmates. These jobs also provide opportunities for Jessie to work on academic and social skills.

In summary, many students with ASD are challenged by the complexities of the typical school environment. Hence, while it is laudable to include students in as many regular school activities as possible alongside their classmates, it has become abundantly clear that alternative environments also need to be available for many students when the “flow of life” becomes overly stimulating or stressful. Clearly, the Flexroom is an ideal setting for this purpose and an alternative whose time has come. 🏠

BIO



Dr. Barry Prizant has more than 40 years experience as a clinical scholar, researcher and international consultant to children and adults with ASD and their families. He is an Adjunct Professor, Brown University, and Director of Childhood Communication Services, a private practice. Barry is co-author of *The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with ASD* (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell, 2006) and the assessment instruments, CSBS, and CSBS-DP (Wetherby & Prizant, 1993, 2002). He has published more than 100 articles and chapters and has presented more than 700 seminars and keynote addresses in the US and internationally. Barry developed and co-facilitates an annual weekend retreat for parents of children with ASD, and is the recipient of the 2005 Princeton University-Eden Foundation Career Award for “improving the quality of life for individuals with autism.” For further information, go to www.barryprizant.com, or contact Barry at Bprizant@gmail.com.