

General Considerations when Teaching Students with Rett Syndrome

Apraxia

Students with Rett syndrome almost always have apraxia. Apraxia is the inability to perform purposeful actions in response to a direct command or question. They may literally be unable to follow directions! Teachers can bypass apraxia by lowering the demand and engaging students with fun conversation and “I wonder...” statements. (Example: “I want to spell ‘cat’. I have the ‘at’. Hmm. I wonder where the first letter is for that word.”) When students are emotionally motivated, apraxia can often be avoided.

Sensory Processing

It is typical for students with Rett syndrome to perceive things in a heightened or dampened way. A complete sensory profile can be done by an occupational therapist. Each individual is different. Be aware of the coping strategies students may use. For example, the student may need a regular movement break to be ready to learn. It may be too difficult to look at a book and listen to the story at the same time. The student may appear disengaged while trying hard to listen.

Eye Contact

Students with Rett syndrome are capable of intense and purposeful eye contact. In fact, they typically use their eyes to communicate. There is no need to work to improve eye contact. Lack of eye contact may be a form of communication or a coping strategy for sensory processing.

Response Time

Due to apraxia, students with Rett syndrome may need an extended amount of time to respond to questions, conversation, observed events, and various stimuli. Educators will need to practice quietly waiting without interruption. Spend time observing your student to determine the best strategies for wait times.

Language

Students with Rett syndrome understand everything and should be exposed to a rich language environment. Literacy instruction is critical for supporting expressive communication development. A speech and language pathologist can assess the student, create goals, and advise you about how best to embed communication strategies into your classroom routines.