

# Be a Supermodel!

Showing can be far more effective than telling, says **Adele Devine**.  
We just need to practise our modelling skills...



It's story time. Maisy puts up her hand and announces loudly, "I need a wee!" As she skips off merrily six more eager little hands shoot up..

We all know that children copy - sometimes without thinking. This can have a negative impact, but it can also be turned around to reinforce positives and promote independence. Some children find it difficult to process language and can miss a large percentage of what people say. If a child has the ability to follow instructions when they are visual rather than verbal, and we do not provide visuals, are we meeting their individual needs?

One of the most effective ways to cater for visual learners is to have other children and support staff model what to do, as the following case studies illustrate...

## CASE STUDY

### Help for Henry (Age 5, Diagnosis: Asperger's Syndrome)

Henry's dependence on adult approval was holding him back. He was constantly waiting for prompts. Leaving him to figure it out did not work. If he couldn't get reassurance and help he would burst into tears. If I asked the class to copy simple pictures Henry needed to be told which colour pen to use. He would sit pen in hand until someone told him to remove the lid. He would not apply pen to paper until he was given another personal instruction. Each small step required a prompt. It wasn't that he couldn't do the task, but the thought of proceeding without constant approval and reassurance seemed overwhelming.

We needed to find a way to get Henry doing things for himself and break the habit of always asking for help in a way that would not cause distress.

I began by showing the class how to complete a very simple task within a structured 'Attention Autism' session. The tasks were well within the abilities of the group - things like making a play-dough

## MODELLING OPPORTUNITIES

THE FOLLOWING ARE SITUATIONS WHEN CHILDREN CAN LEARN VALUABLE LESSONS BY EXAMPLE...

- At dressing-up time.
- When washing hands.
- During physical activities.
- During art activities.
- While finding equipment or resources.
- When tidying up.
- While transitioning between activities.
- At snack-time.
- When turn taking
- When it is necessary to be a 'good loser'.



head with peg features and adding dry spaghetti for hair. I handed out a little kit so each child could create an identical 'Mini Make'. A member of staff also got a kit so that they could sit and work alongside the other children. The adult spoke aloud their thoughts and actions so that if a child did not know what to do, he or she could copy rather than ask. This worked so well with Henry and it was amazing what a contrast we saw between a normal art activity and these 'Mini Make' activities.

Building on this, each time I gave Henry's group something to do, I gave a member of support staff an identical task. Henry had someone to follow and knew he was on the right track. His requests for help and reassurance reduced.

Henry became more independent and his self-esteem improved because he had been given a structure to support his needs.

You can find more information on Attention Autism by visiting [attentionautism.com](http://attentionautism.com)



**about the author**  
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## CASE STUDY

### Carly's sensory cooking (Age 5, Diagnosis: Down Syndrome)

Cooking provides so many learning opportunities for children. I always begin sessions by modelling what the children need to do, then the children have a go themselves following a set of simple visual instructions.

Carly was a sensory seeking child, and it was a struggle to model what to do whilst having to guard the ingredients. She was lightning fast and would pour flour everywhere or dive her hand into the margarine and scoop out a handful. This sensory need was overriding everything, and no one was benefiting from my usual

cooking demonstrations.

So, what to do? I did not want to stop cooking and I knew if I could get Carly to watch the demonstration she could get a lot out of cooking. Before my next session I set up the class camera and did the cooking 'Nigella Lawson style' without my class. I went through each step showing clearly what to do. It felt odd, but strangely liberating.

When the cooking session started I kept the ingredients out of sight and started the video, doing my demonstration as I would have liked to. The video had the children's attention and there was no grabbing or pouring. They all remained in their seats. The session had a much smoother start and without Carly distracting them, the other children saw the demonstration as intended.

Carly still got her sensory fun with the flour when it was available, but at least through the use of video modelling she had seen some cooking. In time we even saw Carly copy some of the steps on the video.

Video modelling can be really effective if a child is distracted by a sensory element or doesn't like teacher talk. Using video not only helped Carly but freed up the other children to learn to cook without being showered in chaos.

## Final thoughts

Josh Billings famously said, "To bring up a child in the way he should go, travel that way yourself once in a while". Children learn by what they see, and they are always looking to us adults for examples. We must train support staff to be the next top models. Children copy, and if they see someone else getting praise for doing the right thing they may follow. We can never make assumptions about what children *know*. By modelling we could build a child's self-esteem and scaffold their success.

## 10 TOP MODELLING TIPS

HELP YOUR STAFF BECOME SUPERMODELS...

- 1** Model being the perfect child so the group leader can praise you: "Great sitting, Lisa."
- 2** Model problem solving when given a task: "I can't open it. Ah - I need to pull here."
- 3** Rather than tell a child to do something, model an action and explain the reasoning: "It's cold. I'm going to put on my coat."
- 4** Model using communication aids for pre-verbal children. Hand over a picture of raisins at snack and say, "I want raisins, please".
- 5** Show good reactions to not getting a turn. The group leader can praise you: "Lisa, you were so good about not having a turn today."
- 6** Listen attentively and react positively to activities and stories - enthusiasm is contagious!
- 7** Try different activities and foods so children can see that trying new things is okay.
- 8** Model what to do when stuck by trying or saying, "I need help, please".
- 9** Model waiting for a turn so the group leader can praise you: "Good waiting."
- 10** Model sharing anxieties and showing how the children can conquer them with adult support.