

Putting spark* into children's lives

Lucas, an eight year old with autism, sat in his classroom gazing around, slouching onto his desk. The teacher had just asked all of the children to get out their math books. Lucas didn't budge. I was there observing him to see where he needed help. I am a speech-language therapist and what I saw in the classroom was not related to the traditional areas of understanding and using language. I knew Lucas understood what the teacher was saying. What he didn't know was when to pay attention, how to ignore irrelevant things, how to manage his body, etc. The scene really disturbed me. I knew that Lucas had many good qualities and abilities but he was in his own little world and was missing important learning opportunities.

This was one of the many observations throughout my career that prompted me to develop spark*. spark* stands for *Self-Regulation Program of Awareness and Resilience in Kids*. I was motivated by the huge need I saw in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to learn how to manage and regulate their own bodies, thinking and emotions. I presented the first level of spark* in a sassily-titled book, *The Autistic Child's Guide to How to Behave*.



The methods often used with children with ASD focus on telling them what to do – “sit down”, “calm down”, “stop running”. I found that, as adults, many of these children had learned to just stand around and wait for someone to tell them what to do. Others acted out or avoided situations they found challenging. What a waste! Too few children and adults with ASD know how to make reasonable choices and decisions for themselves. They were not prepared for the real world and the caring adults around them tried to protect them from harm and distress. At the present time, few adults with ASD live independently, are employed and have friends. That situation just has to change! We need to help children and adults with ASD take a more active and responsible role in their own lives.

If I was going to expect the children to assume more control in their lives, they needed to learn the basic skills, starting with how to control their bodies. The children have to know how, when and where to slow down and speed up their bodies for different situations. They then were better able to regulate their thinking and emotions. The children needed also to become more resilient to over-stimulation and stress, and to advocate for themselves.

Over the past decade, I developed the spark* model, basing it on current positive psychology which focuses on the strengths of each child, current neuroscience and my own years of clinical experience. Slowly and carefully, spark* emerged as other therapists, parents and I field tested the steps and strategies. Unique and important innovations in spark* include:

- a) Mediation approach to teaching where the adult ‘guides’ the child’s learning rather than telling him what to do, ensuring the child shares participation, reciprocates with the adult and understands the meaning and purpose of each activity.
- b) Step-by-step approach, beginning with simple motor movements, working toward each child’s becoming more independent from adult direction. First, help the children become aware of their abilities to self-regulate, followed by learning about when and where they need to use these skills and then learning to become more resilient to distractions and impulses and learn ways to advocate appropriately for themselves.
- c) Incorporate mindfulness, or the ability to remain calm and centered in the ‘here and now’ which reduces anxiety and improves attention.
- d) Emphasize metacognition, teaching the children to be explicitly aware of their actions, thinking, and emotions.

spark* has now been available since the fall of 2010. Therapists and others using it are finding that the children begin to learn more easily after working on self-regulation. We are also finding that the children are acting out less and remaining calmer even when confronted with challenges. At the present time, we are developing a research program with three different universities in Canada to look closely at the impact of spark* on children’s behavior and learning. My goals are to continue examining the impact of spark* on behavior and learning in children with ASD, to develop spark-el* for middle school children and spark-y* for youth with ASD, and extend the use of the spark* model so more children can benefit from improved self-regulation. The best possible outcome of my work on spark* is to see children like Lucas learn, grow and feel contented with their lives.

*Dr. Heather MacKenzie is a speech-language pathologist who is passionate about helping children become the best adults they can. Her latest book, *The Autistic Child’s Guide*, introduces the spark* program. Heather can be reached through her website at www.drheathermackenzie.com. *The Autistic Child’s Guide* can be purchased through Heather’s website, Autism Awareness Center and Parentbooks in Canada and Janelle Publications in the U.S.*