



Module 2: Quick Win: Presuming Competence

Presume Competence

- Assume the student is aware and able to understand, even if they don't show this to you in a way that YOU can understand.
 - This might sound obvious, but when working with neurodiverse students, it can be easy to underestimate them both consciously and subconsciously, which causes you to relate to them in a way that doesn't presume competence.
- Assume the student knows when they are being spoken to and spoken about.
 - Don't discuss the student in their presence as if they are not there.
 - Don't say things in front of the student that you wouldn't want them to hear or wouldn't say in front of them if they were neurotypical.
 - If a parent wants to discuss the student beyond basic home practice instructions, have them email you or set up a call.
- Speak to the student in **age-appropriate language** and in the same way that you would to a non-special needs student of the same age.
 - Speak in full sentences. Don't use short, patronizing phrases like "QUIET HANDS" or "EYES LOOKING".
- Give access to age-appropriate learning material (i.e., don't assign/sing nursery rhymes to a 12 year old, be aware of "childish" illustrations in method books for older students)
- If expectations are not met, do not assume that the student is being manipulative or just needs to "try harder."

It is critical to presume competence by default. Not doing so means presuming **IN**competence. It can affect students' self-esteem, behavior, interest, and frustration levels if they do not feel respected.

- <https://emmashopebook.com/2013/03/07/presume-competence-what-does-that-mean-exactly/>

Modify your expectations of "good behavior"

Remember: Your job is to teach piano, not to judge or modify behavior.

- **Allow "Stimming":** Stimming is self-stimulatory behavior that typically involves repetitive movement or sound. We all do this - clicking a pen when thinking, biting nails when nervous, etc. People with autism and sensory processing issues might do it in ways that you've never seen, such as: flapping hands, jumping up and down, singing/humming/repeating phrases, wiggling fingers, or rocking. Stimming is adaptive and self-regulatory. It is used for emotional regulation, tension relief, increasing focus, and sensory regulation. When over- or under-stimulated, it's a familiar sensation to anchor oneself. **Autistic individuals report that being prevented from stimming ranges from uncomfortable to excruciating.**
 - **Do not:** Unless the stim is harmful to the student or others, do not prevent them from doing it. Do not say "quiet hands" or physically stop them from stimming. Do not "wait until they are still" before you start to teach.
 - **Do:** Proceed with instruction while the student is stimming. If they stim with their hands while trying to play piano, have them play short excerpts of the piece with short breaks to stim in between. Stimming while playing piano will likely decrease over time as the student becomes more comfortable



with you and confident at the piano. You can allow vocal stims while you are instructing or while your student is playing. Autistic individuals are capable of paying attention to other things while they are stimming.

- **Do:** Offer breaks for the student to stim. Have “fidgets” (see Module 3) available in between songs to stim on.
- **Don't wait until the student “seems” to be paying attention.** You may need to reconsider your ideas of “readiness” and “good behavior” (i.e. sitting still, making eye contact with you, being quiet). This does not mean that you have to lower your standards. It means that you have an understanding of your students' needs and are able to reframe and accommodate different learning styles.
- **Don't Force Eye Contact:** Many students with sensory integration issues find it to be painfully intense or have difficulty concentrating on what is being said if they are making eye contact. Countless autistic individuals report being able to pay attention perfectly well, or even better, without eye contact. It may take some getting used to on your part, but making it an issue during lessons will most likely waste time and cause unnecessary stress for your students.
- **Factor in social/communication differences:** Students may have a genuine difficulty when it comes to speech initiation or production. For students that don't speak verbally or speak very little, keep in mind that this is not an issue of disobedience or refusal. They may be unable to produce speech at that moment. For neurodiverse students that do speak verbally, remember that they often have difficulty interpreting social cues and understanding nuances such as sarcasm and idioms. They can be very literal and may seem blunt, rude, or disinterested without meaning to. Be ready for anything when it comes to students' verbal communication, and don't take anything personally. If a student says something that seems rude or outlandish to you, just move on.

Communicate Concisely and Respectfully

- Give direct instructions instead of asking open-ended questions. For example:
 - “Play page 3” instead of “Can you please play page 3 now?”
 - You may think you're being polite by adding the extra words, when in reality you're confusing the student. As a practice, start taking note of every instruction you give to your students (even your neurotypical students) and think of how you can transform it into an instruction or question that doesn't require a verbal response. You can do this with almost anything you say!
- Provide opportunities to answer in nonverbal ways. For example:
 - “Point to the song you'd like to play” instead of “which song would you like to play next?”
 - “Play this note on the piano” instead of “what note is that?”.
 - This works beautifully with ear training, as you can play something and have students echo it on the piano, all without speaking. You can use phrases like “show me” or “please play” or “be my echo/copycat”
- Allow extra time for processing and responding
- Again, speak to the student with age-appropriate language. If you want your student to respect you, speak to them as a respected, competent individual and don't patronize them by using a loud, sing-songy voice, using short phrases such as “EYES LOOKING,” or repeating yourself constantly. Even if parents speak like this, you don't have to. Speak to your students in complete, though concise, sentences.