



**Key points:**

- Encourage students to use comic strip generators to express feelings
- Promote conversation about comics among students
- Allow students to review their strips when needed in the moment

**Uncover benefits of comic strip generators for students with autism**

When a student with autism struggles with responding to a bully or raising his hand in class, encouraging him to create a comic strip representing the situation may help him clarify why he is upset and figure out how to overcome the challenge.

For more than 10 years, Sharon Eilts has been teaching students with autism to use comic strip generators to create comics that reflect what they're thinking and feeling without their having to communicate much verbally. She started with the comic book software Comic Life. More recently, her students have been using the app [Make Beliefs Comix](#) a few times a week to work on their social and communication skills.

"It's opened up a whole new world," said Eilts, a special education teacher at Columbia Middle School in the [Sunnyvale \(Calif.\) School District](#). "It's a really important avenue for them to be able to communicate in a way that's comfortable for them."

Take these steps to use comic strip generators to promote social communication in students with autism:

- **Train kids on tool:** Teach students how to use comic strip generators so they will need little to no help from you, Eilts said. For example, with the free tool Make Beliefs Comix, teachers can show kids how to choose from different animal and human characters to represent themselves and others in scenarios. Students can choose the style of speech or thought bubbles to use. They can also choose the background or setting for the comic strip, objects in the scenario, and sound effects.
- **Start slowly:** Don't expect students to create comic strips that personally relate to them and express emotions from the outset, Eilts said. "They must first practice and play and get comfortable with how to make a comic strip," she said. "They might do silly stories to start." You can prompt a student if he can't come up with a topic on his own, Eilts said. For example, you might suggest a student's first strip feature two animals on vacation.

Once the student becomes comfortable with the app, you can start asking him questions to lead him to work on skills, Eilts said. For example, you can ask the student what could happen on a vacation. One possibility could be that a character has a meltdown. You can ask questions, such as, "Has that ever happened to you? Can you show me in the pictures how you dealt with that? What makes things better when you're at home?" You may have to prompt the child to think of what he does to cope, such as take deep breaths or put on a hoodie to filter everything else out and visualize a peaceful place.

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Students with autism tend to perseverate or get stuck on one topic, Eilts said. Don't let them focus repeatedly on the same issue when making a comic strip. Ensure they are considering a variety of situations and working on a range of skills.

- **Strengthen communication:** Show students that building comic strips is a good way for them to safely interact and share their feelings with others, Eilts said. "They are a communication generator," she said.

For example, a student with autism who learns mostly in general education may not report to her special education teacher that she is being bullied because she doesn't want to be a "snitch" and wants to be considered as "normal" as possible, Eilts said. But she may reveal through her comic strip that she is upset. The student may pick an alligator, for instance, to represent a "bad guy" who framed a bunny for some classroom misbehavior she didn't do. "It's a safe way for the student to explain what's going on," she said.

- **Display and store comic strips:** Students may benefit from having their completed comic strips posted on a board in the classroom for visual support, Eilts said. For example, she said, a board could feature multiple strips with things to do if students have a meltdown. If a student isn't comfortable having his comic strip hang with others in the classroom, though, or needs it to be closer, you can print it and keep it in his binder using a sheet protector, Eilts said. "Students may want to have them handy and readily available," she said. "They might share them in a small group with their peers, but that doesn't mean they have to share them with everybody."

You or the student can also email his comic strip to his parents for generalization outside of school, Eilts said.

[Cara Nissman](#) covers autism, school psychology, and IEP team issues for LRP Publications.

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