

Simple Strategies that Work: Tools for Success

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Several strategies have been found effective in addressing the behavior problems of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). When choosing a strategy it is important to consider the student's individual, unique needs and the function of his behavior because not every strategy is appropriate for everyone. The following strategies were chosen because of their broad nature and ability to be generalized and applied to a variety of behaviors, and implemented in a variety of settings including home, school, and community. These strategies include (a) choice making; (b) the Power Card strategy (Gagnon, 2001); (c) the Incredible 5-Point Scale (Buron & Curtis, 2003); (d) Stop, Observe, Deliberate Act (SODA, Bock, 2001); (e) social autopsies (Bieber, 1994), and (f) home base.

Choice Making

Throughout their everyday life, students with ASD are expected to follow and adhere to adult decisions and agendas to promote their safety and well-being. However, there are many opportunities throughout the day in which students with ASD can be provided with choices. Choice making is a strategy in which small choices and decisions are embedded into daily routines and activities. This strategy allows students with ASD to feel like they have some control over the variables and events in their life. While this is important for everyone, it can be particularly beneficial for students with ASD because it provides them with opportunities to strengthen their problem solving skills, build their self-confidence, and have control over their environment. While some things are not negotiable, many are. For instance, completing a math assignment is not a choice. But choosing what colors of pencil to use when doing the assignment could be. Reading a story is non-negotiable, but when it gets done could be.

When providing choices, it is often important to ask closed questions rather than open ended questions. Asking a student with ASD "What game do you want to play," is likely to result in a generic "I don't know" or an inappropriate behavior due to an overwhelming number of possibilities. This can be avoided by providing a few concrete options to choose among. "Would you like a banana or apple for a snack?" or "Would you like to play Scrabble or Boggle?" If she comes up with another option, praise her for being creative. Many times students with ASD are not aware that there are other options. Help them to identify additional choices available to them. Students with ASD also need to be taught the relationship between a choice and its consequence, so they see that choice making can result in different outcomes. Once the student has made a choice it is important that it is carried out so he can learn and experience the consequence or outcome of their choice. Teaching a student with ASD to consider the consequences or outcomes of each choice prior to making a decision, verbally or in writing, can help build necessary problem solving skills (Baker, 2003; Williams, 2001).

The Power Card Strategy

The Power Card strategy uses the student's special interest as a motivator for appropriate behavior. Developed by Gagnon (2001), this strategy can be used to teach students with ASD appropriate social interactions, behavior expectations, the meaning of language, and the hidden curriculum through a visual aid that integrates the student's special interest. The Power Card Strategy is presented on a single sheet or in booklet

form. Written in first person, it is a brief account describing how the student's hero, who is associated with his special interest, solves a problem that is similar to an issue experienced by the student. An accompanying Power Card is used as a reminder of the steps the student should follow to solve a similar problem himself.

The brief scenario is created that describes a behavior or situation that is difficult for the student incorporating the student's hero, role model, or special interest. The scenario is written at the student's comprehension level, and can vary in size, length, font, and number of visuals. Relevant pictures or graphics of the special interest including photographs, drawings, magazine pictures, and computer-generated images can be included. The first paragraph of the scenario describes the hero successfully attempting a solution to a problem. The second paragraph encourages the student to attempt the solution, which is simplified into three to five manageable steps.

The Power Card is provided as a generalization aid. It is the size of a trading card, bookmark, or business card that can be carried with the student throughout the day or placed on the corner of the student's desk. It contains the three-to-five manageable solutions along with a small picture

The Incredible 5-Point Scale

Our ability to quickly assess the consequences of our behaviors directly impacts how we act, react, and interact in difficult situations. This ability requires self-awareness and self-regulation, skills that are lacking in many students with ASD. Social competence can be greatly enhanced for when the behavior is broken down into clear, concrete parts. Developed by Buron and Curtis (2003), the Incredible 5-Point Scale is designed to assist students with ASD and related disabilities in understanding social interactions and controlling their emotional responses. Rating scales are not new to the field of education, and have been used allow students to rate their feelings of anger, fear, pain, etc. Dunn and Curtis discovered that many of the students with ASD responded well to a rating scale that allowed them to "talk in numbers" instead of using socially and emotionally loaded language. This format matches the major leaning characteristics of many students with ASD by using a clear, concrete visual that allows numbers to represent abstract ideas such as feelings, emotions, and behaviors.

Essentially, the Incredible 5-Point Scale involves identifying a behavior or problem situation and determining a rating scale for the behavior choices available to the student. If possible the student with ASD should develop the rating scale.

A frequently used 5-Point scale is used to explain appropriate voice volume. Numerical ratings could be used as follows: 5 = yelling, 4 = loud talking, 3 = soft talking, 2 = whispering, 1 = no talking. Figure 2 provides an example.

Stop, Observe, Deliberate, Act (SODA)

As previously stated, individuals with ASD do not pick up on the nuances of everyday social interactions and situations. They struggle to understand social cues, and have a tendency to apply a strict, inflexible set of rules to all social situations. In an attempt to help young people with ASD successfully navigate new social situations, Bock (2001) developed the social behavioral learning strategy Stop, Observe, Deliberate, Act (SODA). SODA helps students with ASD replace their own inflexible and ineffective social interaction rules with effective strategies. Each SODA component includes three to five questions or statements that serve as an ongoing cueing system.

The first component, **Stop**, allows the young person to use self-questioning to determine the room arrangement, sequence of events or social routines associated with the setting.

The second component, **Observe**, helps the student note social cues used by people in that setting. They should take note of the general length of a typical conversation, as well what happens when the conversation ends.

The third component, **Deliberate**, encourages the student to consider how others perceive them and to think about what they might do and say. At this stage, the student needs to understand the role of non-verbal social cues including: gestures, body language, eye gaze, intonation, proximity, and facial expression.

The fourth and final component, **Act**, builds on the student's interactions with others. The student approaches a person or group with a plan to participate in the conversation.

Social Autopsies

The social autopsy strategy was developed to help students with social problems learn to interpret social and behavioral situations, and understand social mistakes (Bieber, 1994). It is a mechanism for analyzing a social skills problem by dissecting social incidents. When a social error occurs, the student with ASD works with an adult such as a teacher, counselor, or parent to (a) identify the social error or mistake, (b) determine who was harmed by the mistake, (c) decide how to correct the mistake, and (d) develop a plan to ensure that the mistake does not reoccur.

According to Lavoie (cited in Bieber, 1994), the social autopsy is particularly effective in helping a student with ASD see the cause/effect relationship between his social behavior and the reactions of others. The success of the autopsy strategy is due to its consistent structure of practice, immediate feedback, and positive reinforcement. Therefore, every adult with whom the student with ASD has regular contact should know how to implement a social autopsy in order to promote skill acquisition and generalization. Social autopsies should not be used as a punitive measure, but rather as a constructive and positive problem-solving strategy experience for the student. The social autopsy stages can be illustrated by using written words or phrases or pictorial representations.

Home Base

The home base strategy supports student's ability to function within their environment whether it is at home, school, or out in the community. A home base is a place where the student can go to (a) plan or review daily events; (b) escape the stress of their current environment; or (c) regain control if a tantrum, rage, or meltdown has occurred. The location of home base is not important -- it can be a bedroom or resource room. What is important is that the student with ASD perceives the home base as a positive and reassuring environment. Home base should never be used as a time out, or as an escape from tasks and activities. For example, when student goes to home base at school, she takes her assignment with her. The home base may contain ~~some~~ sensory items determined to help the student calm herself, such as a bean bag chair, weighted blanket, or mini-trampoline.

It may be necessary to schedule the use of home base as a regular part of the student's day. At the beginning of the day, home base can serve to preview the day's schedule introduce and get familiar with changes in the typical routine, ensure that their

materials are organized, or prime them for specific subjects (Myles & Adreon, 2001). Home base is also effective when scheduled after a particularly stressful activity or task.

Summary

This article has provided an introduction to six strategies that can be easily implemented by teachers or parent to help students acquire the skills needed to function more successfully. These interventions help to clarify tasks and demands, provide opportunities for stress reduction, increase student motivation, and build an understanding of our complex social world. Implementation in these strategies across environments can facilitate school and life success for this group of students whose worlds we are just beginning to understand.

References

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