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There's More to Me than ASD

Just like everyone else, individuals who have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have preferences. Some people prefer to sit up front on the bus while others prefer the back seats; some teachers are more productive correcting from home whereas others find that home has too many distractions; some students want to start with their easiest homework while others prefer to get the hardest task out of the way in the beginning. We all have numerous daily opportunities to express opinions and make decisions based on our preferences. Research indicates, however, that students with disabilities are limited in the number of choices that educators and caregivers offer them (Wehmeyer, 2007).

Self-determination is defined by Wehmeyer (2007) as people who act “*volitionally and intentionally to become causal agents in their own lives*” (p. 14). The four essential components of self-determination are autonomy, self-regulation, empowerment and self-realization. More concretely, this involves individuals having choices, knowing personal strengths and needs, having opportunities to attain dreams and goals, possessing decision-making powers, and having the freedom to express opinions and preferences. These same elements are also fundamental to theories related to normalization and the concept of quality of life (“Self-determination principles”, 2011).

Self-determination skills have been shown to be linked to more positive outcomes such as greater motivation, more on-task behaviour as well as more active social participation in school life and the workplace. Moreover, despite the common belief that students with ASD need to learn compliance and accept to not always get their way, evidence has shown that incorporating choice as a positive behaviour support results in a reduction of oppositional behaviours (Wehmeyer, 2007).

The three aims of the Quebec Education Program (QEP, 2004), namely, construction of identity, empowerment, and construction of world view relate directly to the development of self-determination. Here are some ways that educators promote these goals?

Validate students’ feelings Regardless of their means of communication, let students know that you hear them. This allows students to recognize that you understand what they are trying to tell you and how they are feeling.

Use alternatives to simply saying “no” Youth with disabilities hear the word “no” very frequently throughout the day. While sometimes there is no other option than to say “no,” on other occasions, alternative strategies, supported by visual cues, can replace negating what the student is asking for (Frost & Bondy, 2002). For example, the students can be shown what choices ARE available at that time. The students can also be presented an “I am working for” card or a “First/Then” card to specify under what conditions they can obtain what he is asking for. Finally, a “Wait” card might be appropriate to replace saying “No.”

Teacher Tip: Providing Choices

Providing students with multiple opportunities for choice-making is an important way of promoting self-determination. Teachers can readily support students' expression of choice in the classroom and this should be encouraged regardless of the student's level of functioning.

For example, if desks are placed in groups, students can be permitted to choose where they sit within the group. They can choose where to place their books or school supplies on their desk. If using positive behaviour supports, the student can select which reward to work toward. If they have more than one snack, rather than providing one for them, the student can be encouraged to choose which one they would like to eat first. Older students can choose how they occupy their free blocks in their schedule. Of course, it may sometimes be necessary for adults to control what is available as a choice. All choices can also be presented in a visual format as a way of facilitating the skill of choice-making for the student.

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Help students identify their strengths Beginning in elementary school, it is imperative that educators assist students in recognizing what skills they possess. It is equally important to showcase these qualities so that peers are aware of the strengths of their classmates.

Provide opportunities for choice-making Choices give students a sense of control in their lives. This is particularly important for students with ASD. Students who are able to make choices tend to be more motivated and exhibit less challenging behaviours.

Provide time for students to problem-solve on their own Learned helplessness and social dependence are very real long-term concerns for students who have ASD (Weiss, 2013). Giving students with ASD time and space to work out problems on their own teaches valuable life skills such as how to make decisions, how to tolerate frustration, how to communicate needs, and how to ask for help. Students who manage to solve problems on their own show increased autonomy and increased self-concept.

Involve students in the IEP process Start by selecting just one student. Get to know more about this student's strengths, interests and dreams for the future. Find out what this student would like to learn or accomplish during the school year. Allow the student to select from a list of strategies what he/she thinks would be most effective. For more resources related to involving students in their IEP refer to the link <http://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/independent-community-living/self-determination.asp>

In summary, an ASD diagnosis is just one part of who a student is. As educators, it is essential that we also get to know our students' personalities and that we get to know their strengths and interests. Committing to practices that allow each student with ASD to express their individuality and to direct their own lives improves not only their educational outcomes but also their overall potential and quality of life.

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Our team is composed of professionals with a variety of specializations. Designated as a Centre of Excellence within the province, our mandate is to assist LBPSB schools in the implementation of best practices for the inclusion of students with ASD and to serve as a resource to the other English school boards in Quebec. Our team provides assistance to students and families and works to support educational personnel in augmenting their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, consulting, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

We're on the web! <http://coeasd.lbpsb.qc.ca>

Behaviour Tip: Self-Management

Self-management is an important skill that lends to self-advocacy. Self-management is a process in which an individual is taught to independently monitor their behaviour, by recording its occurrence or non-occurrence. The teaching of self-management places an emphasis on behaviours that can be generalized across different contexts to promote independence in individuals with ASD (Don't forget about self-management, 2015).

The following five-step procedure was developed based on the work of Koegel, Koegel and Parks (1995).

1. Define the target behaviour:

The target behaviour must be specifically and operationally defined so that the individual is able to clearly identify and record the occurrence or absence of the behaviour. For example, behaving well in the classroom is an ambiguous and potentially subjective definition of the target behaviour. A more precise and observable behaviour would be to measure staying seated at your desk for a specified duration of time (or until the teacher permits otherwise).

2. Identify reinforcers that are functionally equivalent:

A reinforcer serves to strengthen the behaviours that is exhibited. Every behaviour serves a function and often that function will be the most reinforcing. An example is an individual tantrumming in order to escape a demand that they are not interested in. Intuitively, using escape (access to free-play or access to choosing activity) as the reinforcer for engaging in the appropriate behaviour (e.g. staying on-task) would be the most potent.

3. Choose a method or tool for self-management:

It is important to provide a clear system in which to record the occurrence or lack of occurrence of the behaviour. This type of tool could include checklists, token systems, wrist counters, etc. In selecting the most effective tool, take into consideration the individual's level of functioning, the person's age, and the feasibility of the tool in the context in which the behaviour is being monitored.

4. Teach the individual how to use the self-management tool:

This is a critical step as the individual must be able to understand how to identify the occurrence or absence of the behaviour and how to utilize the recoding system. Modeling, practice, and reinforcement are important in order to produce accurate recording of the target behaviour.

5. Teach self-management independence:

At this point in the process, the facilitator gradually fades support and the individual begins to self-monitor and self-reinforce. By fading prompts at this stage, the frequency that the individual engages in self-management will increase. The schedule of reinforcement should be thinned; this can be done by increasing the periods of time between sessions of self-recording. Lastly, at this point in the process, the individual should be capable of accessing their own reinforcers when self-monitoring.

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