PROJECT ACCESS FACT SHEET #5

Missouri's educational leader in autism support

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THE TEACHER'S CHECKLIST: QUESTIONS TO PONDER WHEN REVIEWING YOUR SCHOOL PROGRAM

Most of us find little opportunity in the non-stop business of educating students with autism to review general programming. Making time to do so periodically through the year allows the teacher to make corrections in the direction of students' general education, and provides that needed satisfaction of knowing you are on the "right track" in your classroom. The following questions are designed to remind you of programming issues you might not be thinking about in your hectic daily schedule. Let your students' parents and your administration know about the exemplary job you're doing in addressing some of the areas below. Collaborative Teaming Idea: Use one of the questions as a focus for the next team meeting in which you participate.

1. Is your student learning to work independently? Does s/he have a system in which s/he follows his/her own schedule, obtains his/her own materials, completes tasks independently, and indicates completion? Our philosophy is that **every child should have an independent work system in place by age ten**. If your student doesn't have one, this should be a priority. Kindergarten is not too early to start on this and if your student is past the age of ten, you just need to work harder and faster. Every child with autism needs an individual workstation. Clearly defined work and play (leisure) areas help students differentiate work time from play/leisure time. A work system is an essential tool for learning to learn and becoming an independent, employable, socially competent adult.

2. Is a visual schedule of the student's activities available for his/her use? Is it portable? Can it be updated to look even more adult-like? Is s/he using the visual schedule? Most students, whether low functioning or high functioning, benefit from using a visual schedule. It is helpful to scramble activities and timing of events periodically so that the student attends to his/her schedule rather than memorizing a routine.

3. Don't forget reinforcements (rewards for appropriate behavior). Catch your student being good and let him/her know about it in a meaningful, age-appropriate way. Try to have an established list of at least ten "motivators", or "goodies", and make it a goal to add one more each week. Build these rewards right into your student's visual schedule. And don't thin out the reinforcement schedule too quickly. All of us need something to keep working for besides just the "joy" of working.

4. Does your student have a communication system which s/he uses consistently? Even students who use speech sometimes need an augmentative system when under stress. Is the system (communication board, picture book, facilitation letter board or communicator) accessible to the student at the times and places s/he is most likely to want/need to communicate. Do other people use the system to communicate with the student? Be sure not to let an augmentative system be shoved aside because it is inconvenient. Rethink the system or the way it is used. Everybody deserves a way to express him/herself!

5. Is your classroom arranged according to the three living domains: domestic/self-help, recreation/leisure, and vocational/academic? Are the materials necessary for each domain stored in each area and readily accessible to the student whenever his schedule sends him to an area? The goal is independence from excessive verbal cueing, so s/he must be able to retrieve materials without lots of assistance. Are the materials in each domain area age appropriate and meaningful for this student? Behavior improves when the tasks presented have meaning for the student.

6. Is there time in your schedule to address the fourth living domain by taking the student out into his/her community? The student's age determines where his/her community is located, what s/he should be doing there, and how much time should be spent there.

7. What about social skills training? Does your student have opportunities for direct structured interactions with non-disabled age peers? If a student is "mainstreamed" for one or more classes it is easy to assume that social interaction will "just happen". A student with autism needs direct social skills instruction built into his/her schedule. Remember: Proximity does not necessarily mean interaction! Plan it!

8. Sensorimotor integration . . . Does our student have unusual responses to incoming sensory stimuli? Remember visual and auditory senses but don't forget balance, touch, taste, smell, sense of muscle movement, etc. You may need to consider getting a sensory motor integration evaluation. We all know if our bodies are not functioning properly, learning and/or behaving properly is much more difficult. If you suspect sensory problems call us for a checklist and discuss your concerns with an OT, PT, or adaptive physical education specialists. ACCESS has a list of **Occupational Therapy Activities for the Classroom** available upon request.

9. Last, but not least, do you remember your ABC's? What is your initial reaction to challenging behaviors? Is it an attempt to extinguish the behavior? Or is it to investigate the communication function of that behavior? Are you analyzing problem behaviors to determine why the student is behaving the way s/he is? Exactly what happens just before the behavior occurs? What happens immediately afterward, even if you haven't planned it? What happens on those occasions when the problem behavior does not occur? Are you considering that this behavior may be a means of communication? Remember: behavior, however deviant, is often the means by which a person who is otherwise unable to communicate tells us how he perceives and/or tolerates an environment.

For more information regarding any of the topics above, contact Project ACCESS at 866-481-3841. There are training opportunities throughout the year. Everyone's welcome and you can brainstorm with one of the ACCESS staff persons. Remember! Congratulate yourself for work well done and let others know that you're meeting the needs of your student with autism through good programming.

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