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Missouri's educational leader in autism support

Skill Acquisition and Performance: Programming and Assessment Implications

In Scott Bellini's book, Building Social Relationships, he looks at skills as being an acquisition issue or a performance issue. This is an important distinction and has implications for both assessment and programming planning. In fact, he states, "The success of your social skills program hinges on your ability to distinguish between skill acquisition deficits and performance deficits." We would take that a step further and indicate this distinction needs to be made for most skills.

Bellini defines a *skill acquisition* deficit as the absence of a particular skill or behavior. The individual does not know how to perform a particular skill. On the other hand, he describes a *performance deficit* as a skill or behavior that is present but not demonstrated or performed.

Assessment

Let's look at this in terms of assessment. Many standardized assessment instruments test whether or not a skill is present. Basing an eligibility or programming decision on standardized instruments alone does not reflect the entire picture. How many times have we heard educators say, "I know he knows how to do the skill, but he doesn't perform it in class"? This is because there may be a performance deficit. In fact, a deficit in the ability to perform a skill in real time under multiple contexts is a hallmark of autism. We know an individual who was described by a provider like this, "He has many skills; too bad they aren't connected to anything." This rather rude remark actually pointed to the fact this student had acquired skills, but did not perform them in context.

When assessing an individual for eligibility in a school setting, it is important to look at not only the acquired skills, but also at skills that are not reliably performed in context. We know of students who were not found eligible for services because the evaluation team only looked at skill acquisition. However, they were not applying these skills in context.

What can we do? At Project ACCESS we have long encouraged school teams to observe, observe, observe. Don't just observe during an academic lesson in a classroom. Watch the student in the halls, at lunch, and at recess. Watch the student when he or she is involved in a collaborative

learning activity with other students. Is she applying the skills she has? Document these skills. This discrepancy is support for an eligibility decision.

When speaking specifically about social interaction, Michelle Garcia Winner states, "The dynamic nature of social interaction is not easily captured in a linear standardized test battery." Scott Bellini offers these checkpoints when determining the distinction between acquisition of skills and performance of those skills:

- Does the child perform skills across settings and people?
- Does the child perform the skill without support or assistance?
- Does the child perform the skill fluently and effortlessly?
- Does the child perform the skill when reinforcement is provided?
- Does the child perform the skill when environmental modifications are made?

Programming

Of course, there is no single, specific strategy that can be applied to helping the student acquire and effortlessly perform skills. That is an individual decision. But, there is much we can do in terms of teaching skills that will promote performance. We can think about generalization. In the field of Applied Behavior Analysis, it is often a recommendation to think about how a specific skill will be generalized even while in the planning stage of skill acquisition. We have multiple people teach the skill in multiple settings. The performance of the skill cannot be confined to just one contrived setting. We can use a variety of materials to teach the same skill. We can take the skill into the community and perform it in real-life contexts. Many early childhood teachers and therapists who teach in the home setting, use the child's own playthings and items to develop a skill. This too, promotes generalization.

Resources

Bellini, S. (2006), *Autism Social Skills Profile within Building Social Relationships; A Systematic Approach to Teaching Social Interaction Skills to Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Other Social Difficulties*; p. 73. Autism Asperger Publishing Co.; Shawnee Mission, KS.

- https://www.socialthinking.com/Articles?name=AssessingTheSocialMindInAction
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xU395HgXl2s (This video is on Generalization.)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzgC9ZPzot8 (This video is on Incidental Teaching.)