PROJECT ACCESS FACT SHEET #28

projectaccess.missouristate.edu
projectaccess@missouristate.edu
866-481-3841

Missouri's educational leader in autism support

A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Words: Ideas To Help Structure Effective Teaching For Visual Learners

Children with autism are responsive to structure. Receptive language difficulties and the inability to communicate even the most basic needs are characteristics of autism. Sometimes the inability to convey simple things such as being hungry, hot, or bored is instead communicated by tantrums or aggression.

Children with autism are easily distracted and lack the skill in perception and organization of time, leading to behaviors that get in the way of learning. Teachers must structure and organize classroom life in order for these children to learn.

Visual representations of time and place will help the child with autism attach meaning to such abstract ideas. Visual features of structure that have been proven useful are: (1) physical organization (2) scheduling and (3) teaching strategies.

Physical organization

Because children with autism typically have receptive language problems, providing a structured environment will help students understand directions and rules. Having specific areas for learning specific tasks, marking clear boundaries, and making materials easily accessible helps students independently know where they are supposed to be and where to get their own materials. Pictures, color coding, number symbols, etc. can help students label and obtain or put away materials by themselves.

Scheduling

Visual scheduling presents the abstract concept of time in a concrete and manageable form. This ability to predict events brings order and security to a person, allowing him/her to spend time learning rather than frightened or worried. The student's level of understanding will dictate what type of visual representation will be used in the schedule. A hierarchy of abstraction of visual symbols range from gestures and photographs to written sentences and signing.

Choose the type of symbol by experimenting to see what symbols the student can match.

    Step 1. Get a symbol of each current activity in the student¹s day and arrange them in order.

    Step 2. Depending on the functioning level of the student, give him/her the whole day's schedule or a part day schedule.

    Step 3. Instruct the use of the schedule and teach the process of attending to the schedule.

    Step 4. Teach acceptance of changes in routine by periodically changing the schedule.

    Step 5. Begin to insert new functional/meaningful tasks into the schedule.

Teaching strategies

A teacher must systemize and organize teaching methods by using prompts and reinforcers to teach students. An example of this type of teaching is a type of visual instruction called a jig, or interactive participation of teacher and student in a *joint action routine (JAR)*.

A picture jig is typically a picture or a line drawing on a card, which shows the layout of materials in their correct sequence and the finished product. It provides the visual instruction necessary to assemble or package a product. Depending on the type of task the student is asked to do, he/she will use the *jig* by either placing the materials directly onto the card, or by looking at it as a visual reminder. A *JAR* is a teaching method developed to promote the natural process by which language is acquired. It is sequential, but variable, and has a unifying theme or purpose that is recognized by all participating.

When a developmental speech/language classroom teacher in Springfield is preparing her students for each community project, she gives them practice words she knows they will use. If they're planning a visit to the Zoo Spectacular, she gives them words such as hayride, Halloween, pumpkin and animals. Then she gives her students clearly defined roles in a routine- it's like playing a part in a play. She teaches the students how to purchase tickets, ask for cookies, talk to others, etc.

She participates in the routines as a model for desired behaviors. The routine has a clearly defined beginning and end and structured sequence in between. Terrie varies the JAR with each new community project.

For more information on Structured Teaching procedures, you can visit Division TEACCH at www.teacch.com/ . There are articles and instructional information at www.teacch.com/educational-approaches/structured-teaching-teacch-staff

Working on picture jigs.

Resources

Ben-Arieh, J. (2007). *How to Use Joint Action Routines.* Austin, TX: PRO-ED, Inc.

Bernard-Opitz, V. & Haubler, A. (2011). *Visual Support for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders: Materials for Visual Learners.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company (AAPC).

Henry, K. (2005). *How Do I Teach This Kid? Visual Work Tasks for Beginning Learners on the Autism Spectrum.* Arlington, TX

Hodgdon, L. (2011). *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication: Practical Supports for Autism Spectrum Disorders.* Troy, MI: QuirkRoberts Publishing. ISBN: 0-9616786-1-5.