Motivating Students Who Have Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Motivating individuals who have autism spectrum disorder is an essential but often difficult challenge. It is essential because, by definition, they have restricted repertoires of interests and skills needed for community living and coping. Without planned, positive experiences, these individuals often become increasingly victimized by their autism as they age. With successful experiences, each can become a victor who lives, works, and plays in the community. It is difficult, at least in part, because people who have autism are particularly vulnerable to key factors, which impact motivation.

An individual's motivation is strongly influenced by: learning history; learning styles; internal and external incentives to engage in tasks; expectations of success or failure with a particular task; meaningfulness and purposefulness of the task from the perspective of the learner; and task-surrounding environmental variables which affect attention and achievement.

In general, tasks and activities which learners associate with past success tend to stimulate interest. Success begets success! Challenges, which trigger memories of past anxieties and failures, tend to stimulate avoidance reactions and self-preservation responses. Although learners who are highly motivated to learn through problem solving often see occasional failure as a challenge, repeated failure fosters feelings of futility and frustration in fragile learners who lack self-confidence and may lack competencies for task-related problem solving.

When diligently applied, proactive strategies often prove successful in eventually eliciting positive, productive responses and pride in personal accomplishment. The following are just a few success-oriented strategies that support motivation for individuals who have autism spectrum disorder:

Know the individual.

Maintain a current list of the individual's strengths and interests. Include preoccupations and fascinations that may be considered "bizarre" or strange. Use these strengths and interests as the foundation for gradually expanding the individual's repertoire of skills and interests. Note tasks or activities, which create frustration and heightened anxiety for the individual. Attention to these factors can result in avoiding episodes, which perpetuate insecurity, erode confidence, foster distrust in the environment, and generally result in avoidance behaviors.

Pay attention to processing and pacing issues, which may be linked, to cognitive and/or motor difficulties inherent to the individual's autism. Give the individual time to respond. Vary types of cues given when movement disturbances are suspected.

Structure a supportive environment. Both the social and physical milieu should encourage and support successful task performance.

Teach in natural environments that contain the cues and reinforcement which prompt and maintain learned behaviors whenever possible.

Be sure that everyone involved encourages and supports independent effort whenever possible. Willingness to try to perform independently as opposed to remaining dependent on others results when the individual attributes successful performance to his own efforts rather than to external factors. Plan optimally stimulating (neither too stimulating nor too nonstimulating) tasks and activities. Plan ways to decrease the impact of environmental distractors that interfere with task initiation and completion.

Use instructional strategies, which support successful outcomes.

- Assemble materials, or teach the learner to assemble materials, in task- appropriate sequences.
- Teach new tasks by providing examples or modeling so the learner has a clear vision of task sequences and expected outcomes.
- Incorporate learning tasks into preferred topics and activities.
- Plan tasks and activities that result in meaningful outcomes from the perspective of the learner.
- Vary tasks and activities frequently as opposed to requiring boring repetition. Conversely, capture opportunities to expand learning when interest is high.
- Plan and present tasks and activities at an appropriate level of difficulty for the individual involved.
- Provide instructions or information visually as opposed to verbally to decrease distraction and to make information more user friendly for the person.
- Introduce unfamiliar tasks in a secure environment so that later learned familiarity will capture the individual's attention in more challenging environments. For example, if science class is going to discuss the stars during class time, parents might observe a night sky with their son/daughter. This provides a familiar link to subsequent school experiences. This familiarization process is sometimes referred to as **"teaching pivotal behaviors."** Learned behaviors become pivotal in motivating the individual to attend to tasks in a variety of situations.
- Assign specific models for the individual to observe and imitate when in-group activities such as circle time or group exercises. When in more fluid group situations, assign or help the individual to select a specific role, which he or she can perform. Teach the individual how to perform selected roles. Plan for successful outcomes that can be achieved "here and now" rather than at some more distant time. Rather than pushing for a perfect response, reinforce all goal-directed attempts. Structure motivating event sequences in which the less familiar, less preferred activity is followed by the familiar, preferred experience (First _____, then _____.). Structure short, successful experiences with less preferred activities and longer, equilibrium restoring experiences with more preferred, easier-to-tolerate activities. This strategy works particularly well for very hesitant learners who have extremely restricted repertoires of interests.

For learners with broader repertoires of interests and skills, build motivational momentum by beginning with highly preferred, success- guaranteed tasks and alternating such tasks and activities with less preferred, more challenging tasks throughout the day. This strategy also works for individuals who are so highly aroused by anticipated preferred events that they cannot focus on other tasks until the highly stimulating need has been addressed. Focus on errorless learning. Teach (perhaps by modeling or having a peer model) the person to do the task right the first time. Avoid having the learner undo or disassemble products, which he or she perceives as finished. Erasing work or taking apart finished products often makes no sense to the learner and may result in a "Why do it?" response mode. Plan ways to correct or repeat work that does not involve undoing what has been done. Offer attention-getting choices, which stimulate personal involvement.

In general, accentuate the positive; disempower the negative.

Finally, remember that failure, sarcasm, ridicule, and apparent lack of confidence on the part of those who live and work with people with autism spectrum disorders decrease motivation and perpetuate cycles of learned helplessness. Increased motivation results from experiences, which teach people how to interact with both social and physical environments in ways that result in positive outcomes. While always most secure with the familiar, resistance to the unfamiliar decreases and inclinations to try gradually increases as people with autism spectrum disorders learn that they will be okay and that they might even enjoy a new experience.

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