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Visual Schedules and Choice Boards: Avoid Misinterpretation of their Primary Functions

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(BBB Autism; printable article #52)

Christopher's Mom, Mrs. Smith, indicated at Christopher's Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting that developing an expressive communication system for her son who was nonverbal should be paramount for the present school term. Christopher's school team agreed and wrote an objective that Christopher would use augmentative means of communication on a daily basis throughout the school day. One month later, Mrs. Smith came to visit the classroom. The teacher proudly demonstrated how she used choice boards and a schedule display as Christopher's "augmentative" communication system. Mrs. Smith was dismayed and frustrated at the teacher's interpretation of the IEP objectives. His teacher was perplexed and disappointed by the mother's reaction; she expected praise for her immediate and efficient follow through on the IEP.

While the scenario described above was hypothetical, the circumstances are quite common. Many well-intentioned people do not understand the primary purpose of choice boards and schedules and confuse the role of and the mechanism for receptive and expressive communication. The purpose of this article is to help people understand these critical distinctions and to reduce communication breakdowns that can surround interpretation of these interventions.

Schedules

Schedule displays depict via pictures or text a series of events. A display may show the whole sequence of events within a time frame or the events may be on separate cards that are displayed sequentially (e.g., a set of cards fastened by a loose leaf ring). A morning series may show, for example, that the first event of a school day is homeroom, followed by music class in the music room, reading activities back in the classroom, recess, art in the art room, math back in the classroom, and lunch in the cafeteria.

The primary purpose of a schedule is to give event/location and sometimes time information to the person with autism spectrum disorders. This information allows the person to see/know what events must happen before a specific activity such as recess, and what will occur following that favored event.

A schedule also can become a convenient way of announcing changes in the daily routine. For example, knowing that a field trip occurs in the morning and that music class will not occur can help the individual with autism spectrum disorders to be better prepared for the flow of the day. Knowing what will happen and in what order also can reduce some of the anxiety associated with each school day. This type of information may be crucial for someone who has difficulty making transitions. Even those individuals who are more flexible with transitions and who seem to have the schedule memorized, find it reassuring to know when things will happen in the order that he or she expects.

The primary function of a schedule is to give information to the person with autism spectrum disorders and not to get information from him or her. A schedule is a receptive communication tool in that it aids comprehension of the messages provided by others. The use of a schedule is an example of a positive programming strategy. A schedule does not constitute a primary expressive communication display, however. Communication interactions that surround a review of the schedule are co-incidental to its primary function.

Choice Boards or Choice Displays

The primary purpose of giving person choices is to have him or her have some control over certain situations. Both adults and children like to have some control over their lives. It is more satisfying or motivating to be able to decide which snack one might have, which video to watch, or whether one does math first or second. Providing choice is a positive programming strategy that may reduce some situational behavior problems.

A choice board or choice display is a visual two or three-dimensional exhibit of the choice possibilities. The choices may be expressed as pictures or text (two dimensional) or can be represented by objects or tangible symbols (three



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dimensional). A spoken (i.e., verbal) presentation of choices is often not effective with individuals with autism spectrum disorders. They may not listen to the whole message, they may not be tuned into the message until the speaker is already mentioning the second or third option, and the message may be quickly forgotten. With a visual display, the individual has time to see all the possibilities, has time to think about the decision, and has time to check the options as often as he or she needs, before making a decision.

The primary purpose of a choice board, then, is to present a visual display of options. It is a strategy that will aid or support the comprehension of the auditory message and choice situation by circumventing the rapid disappearance of the spoken message regarding choices. Under most circumstances, if the speaker says, "Do you want crackers or apples?" the message is over in less than a few seconds. The visual display of choices can be reviewed indefinitely relative to the spoken message alone. Although the person with autism spectrum disorders makes an expressive response when he or she does make a choice, it is a very limited communicative response to a situation initiated by someone else. The person with autism cannot express much more than "want" or "not want" relative to the choices.

Augmentative Communication Systems (AAC) or Meeting Expressive Communication Needs

Neither the schedule nor the choice display function as an alternative or augmentative "voice" for the nonverbal person with autism spectrum disorders. Neither one has as its primary purpose the objective of making the individual a more efficient communicator. Augmentative systems (or AAC which stands for augmentative and alternative communication) are focused on expressive communication by the individual who needs augmented support for his vocal abilities. It is not a system of support for aiding comprehension of the speech of others.

Well-designed augmentative systems allow an individual to express a variety of messages. The messages may be requests, directives, refusals, comments, questions, social greetings, and so forth. Augmentative systems allow the person to shift roles from responding to the communication of others to initiating topics, comments, or requests. Augmentative displays can consist of tangible symbol displays, pictures organized on manila folders, to sophisticated displays accessed through computers. Unlike schedule and choice displays which usually represent the messages that the adult (teacher, parents, etc.) wishes to convey, the thrust of an AAC system is to enable the person to express the messages that he or she (i.e., the person with autism spectrum disorders) would like to convey.

Keeping the distinctions clear relative to the purpose/use of schedule and choice boards is important for family and service providers. Without an understanding of that distinction, some individuals with autism spectrum disorders will be robbed of access to an expressive medium that allows them to utter a variety of messages. Without the experience of using a comprehensive expressive system, they may fail to gain an understanding or appreciation of the potential power of communication.

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