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The Educational Identification of Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is increasing in our population. Current data from the Centers for Disease Control show that 1 in 68 children has been identified with ASD. This new estimate is roughly 30% higher than the 2008 estimate. School staff members need to be trained in how to identify ASD; to create a systematic process to help other staff and families identify students who may have ASD; and to determine if these students are eligible for special education services.

As defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), autism is a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences.

A systematic process for the identification of ASD may begin with initial discussions between parents and their child's general education teacher. Once concerns are voiced, other professionals from the school may become involved. If a disability is suspected, a referral to the special education team is recommended.

A meeting with parents is planned where student and parent rights are discussed and parent permission is sought for a comprehensive evaluation. The team, which now includes the parents, discusses the nature of the assessments as well as the child's strengths and concerns, and prepares a plan of action.

Individuals with ASD can range in abilities from gifted to severely challenged. Therefore, assessments need to address the child's individual needs. Social skills, communication skills and restricted interests/repetitive behaviors should be assessed in every evaluation because these deficits are hallmarks of an autism spectrum disorder.

The process continues with a meeting to determine eligibility for special education services. If the child is found to have a disability — that is, if s/he has an educational identification of ASD and it affects her/his ability to access general education — then an Individualized Education Plan is created for the child.

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Notes from the Corner

Pam Scharping, M.Ed., BCBA

Seven Steps for Earning Instructional Control



In Robert Schramm's book, "The Seven Steps to Earning Instructional Control" strategies are provided to reduce instructors nagging, forced physical prompts, and continuous escape blocking. The goal is to create a learning environment where escape behavior is less desirable than the reinforcing value of the teaching setting. To maximize a child's learning potential, the teaching setting needs to become the child's preference.

Step 1: You are the reinforcer gatekeeper. Reinforcers should be kept in sight, but not accessible unless given permission. See-through containers for young children or a locked room/cabinet for older students are two examples. Restriction of reinforcement allows you to be more effective during teaching time, but is not used to deny the child of reinforcing stimuli during free time.

Step 2: Be fun! Show your student it is more fun sharing experiences with you than without you. This is a behavior principle known as "Pairing". When pairing, follow your student's interest and offer him access to play with anything he is interested in as long as you are allowed to play along with him.

Step 3: Gain the student's trust. Say what you mean and mean what you say. When a directive is given, do not allow access to reinforcement until the request is followed (prompt if necessary). Avoid second chances, warnings, negotiation, or deals.

Step 4: Teach that following directions is the best means to obtain items/activities. Deliver easy directions often and then reinforce following directives with good experiences. This step uses the Premack Principle or Grandma's Rule: "Before you get your dessert, you first have to eat your dinner."

Step 5: Provide consistent reinforcement. Initially, reinforce after each positive response. Work towards decreasing the frequency and randomizing the schedule of reinforcement over time.

September Trainings

(Click above for more information!)

September 9 **Tri-State Webinar: Bullying and the Autism Spectrum** (Online)

September 11 **Early Childhood Regional Stabilization Training**

September 16: **Evaluation Toolkit: Part 1** (Online)

September 18: **Early Childhood Regional Stabilization Training**

September 23: **Evaluation Toolkit: Part 2** (Online)

September 30: **Tri-State Webinar: Expanding the World Through Social Development** (Online)

Step 6: Demonstrate understanding of your student's priorities as well as your own. Know what activities/items your student prefers to engage in. List what goals you are working on and the current reinforcement criteria. Use the child's motivation and try to present skills as they relate to the child's current interest.

Step 7: Demonstrate that ignoring instructions or choosing inappropriate behavior will not result in obtaining reinforcement. The student must not receive access to preferred items, extra attention, or escape after failing to follow a directive.

