

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

Christine Reeve: I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education but my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Chris, and I am so glad you're here today for another new episode. Today, I wanted to talk about something that you hear me say a lot if you've been listening for a while but I might not have talked about it very explicitly: Engagement.

I realized that I frequently talk about the need to keep students engaged. I talk about doing things to keep them engaged. I talk about the importance of keeping them engaged. I talk about how we do X or Y to keep them engaged and so on, but I really haven't talked a lot about why that engagement is so important.

Now, there's obviously some answers to this that I think most people would know: engage students or students who are learning. There, I'm done. We can all go home. That was a lot easier than I expected. Now we're done. Well, yes, of course, that is definitely one of the reasons why engagement is so important. Unengaged students don't learn well and that's true across education so yes, that is pretty obvious. Duh!

But with students with ASD and other disabilities, there are other things about engagement that are important and maybe even more important and even more basic about engagement that I want to talk about. Because engagement is to me the key to everything. So let's get started.

Let's start with what engagement is and what it means to be engaged, not to be married, just engaged. Then I'll talk about why engagement is important and then I've got some ways we can keep students engaged successfully at times when it might be difficult but also so important.

First, what do I mean by engagement? Well, engagement simply means that students are involved in some way in meaningful activity. It can be involved in a group activity like listening to a book be read during morning meeting, or it could be that they are engaged or involved in completing a work task during independent work.

Typically, engagement does not mean just sitting while something goes on around them. There has to be some measure or indicator that they are actively engaged. Typically, this means answering a question, watching the speaker, nodding to a comment, raising their hand, holding up a visual, or communicating an answer.

But simply sitting and looking at the floor while the activity goes on around them is not really engagement or participation. Perhaps, it's passive engagement, but it's difficult to behaviorally define that as engagement because it's not behavior. It's not behavior that I can observe and see happening. I'm a behavior analyst so I have to stick with that.

They have to be doing something active in order to show us that they're engaged. I could be sitting in an activity and be a thousand miles away in my brain and have no idea what's going on. On the other hand, we do know that for some of our students, they could be sitting there looking like they're not engaged but be able to recite back exactly what's happening in the group. We don't always know.

But we really do have to focus on what we can see as engagement. When we think about engagement, I think that's what we have to focus on, we can't rely on the idea that just sitting there means that they could be engaged. We have to be able to say that we know that it's engagement. I have to use that as my definition.

Next up. Why is engagement so darn important? Well, there's a number of reasons. There's the "duh" reason I gave at the beginning, it's how they learn. Students who aren't engaged don't learn. That's been recognized by large numbers of people, but most recently, the Council for Exceptional Children has listed engagement as a highly leveraged practice to keep students engaged in the classroom. It's been something that they have identified as one of its most important practices in a classroom.

But the main reason that I talk about engagement so much, and the reason that I say it's a magic ingredient in a classroom, is because engagement has a huge impact on students' behavior. Student engagement has a kind of momentum to it. When it's going, when the student is engaged, they keep moving forward on its track. Their engagement keeps them going. But when their engagement slows or stops, the track gets jumped and the student's behavior gets off track. That's when we get more challenging behavior.

The biggest issue is that once the engagement is off the track, it's a hundred times harder to get it back on track. When the engagement is on track, it's easy to keep them on track. When it jumps the tracks, it's a whole lot harder to get them back. Once they're not engaged with you, it's a whole lot harder to get that attention back on you, to get that work and that focus back on the activity that you are running at that time. Keeping their engagement is so much easier than regaining it.

It pays to keep their behavior and their engagement on track and moving even if it means varying some from our instructional plan. It's why if we're running an activity and we see that our student's engagement is starting to flag, we see that they're starting to not attend, we should consider shutting our activity down and moving on. We want to end with the students engaged because if we lose their engagement, we're going to have to spend a whole lot more time getting the engagement back. I would rather sacrifice a little bit of my activity to keep that engagement going.

This is precisely why I prioritize engagement over other things sometimes. Would it be nice to give the student the really challenging work every single minute of the day? Maybe. Would it be nice for him to work on the things that challenge him all the time and would he make faster progress? Maybe. But not if doing that challenges him so much that he loses focus, loses engagement and all we get is challenging behavior because then we make no progress.

If I have to spend all my time working on his engagement, then I'm not teaching anything new and he's not making any progress. If it results in him just engaging from the classroom activity and I have to spend the rest of the day trying to get him back on track, then I've lost instructional time. I'd rather make a little concession to stopping early or giving easier work for a short period of time and keeping the engagement than try to push through and lose it because then I'm going to lose more time.

Because here's the real trick and issue with engagement, you can lose it in an instant but it can take you hours or the rest of the day to get the students' engagement back. During that time, you're likely to be spending a lot of your time redirecting challenging behavior, trying to assure safety, working on crowd control, and trying to keep one student's disengagement from catching to all the other students in the classroom because you know that one student's behavior impacts the rest of the students too and that just makes it even harder, it just becomes like a snowball running through your classroom and it just picks up speed across the board.

Let's think about what you can do to keep engagement on track because there are a couple things that you can do proactively to make this happen. If you've heard me say if you listen to this podcast more than once that downtime is not your friend, well, that's essentially the same thing as saying you want to maintain engagement, you want to avoid downtime because it means the student isn't engaged. That means that you want to schedule your day so that your students are engaged throughout the day. You want the day to run quickly without any lags between activities, for instance.

One of the times a day when I often see engagement get lost is during transitions. Many times, we schedule too much time into our transitions or we don't have a plan for our transitions. When either of those things happen, our students go into slow motion or they get distracted. "Ooh iPad!" and that means that we lose them. Now we have to expend all this extra time and energy to get them back on track, not what we want to do.

I see a lot of people schedule time into their day as transition time. I don't do it that way. I schedule my day so that my transitions are planned with a system but they're planned as a part of the activity. Who goes to the schedule first to check it so that you don't have everybody mobbing the visual schedules at one time? I don't plan ten-minute transitions because what's everybody else doing? Everybody can't do it at the same time. That just leaves you way too much time for them to wander around and get into problems.

I build my transition time into my activity time so that we're always scheduled in an activity and the transition time comes out of that. If you aren't checking your schedule or actually moving from place to place, you're in an activity. When you get to the activity, the material is there in the student's hand to start with.

I have it set up ahead of time so when he gets to his seat, boom, he's got stuff to do because otherwise, he doesn't stay there and he disengages. Waiting is not a skill that our students have unless we've taught our students to wait. Typically, if we've taught them to wait, we've taught them how to engage themselves. If your students try to engage themselves, then we don't have to do it for them and this isn't as much of an issue. That's tip number one: assign how your

transitions will happen and make sure that you have a way to get materials in their hands as soon as they get to the next activity.

Number two: Schedule engaging activities when you have less staff. There will be times of the day when you have fewer staff members to engage with the students, and keeping them all engaged will be more difficult. Think about times after lunch when you need to have staff lunch breaks, and you need to have staff lunch breaks, that's another big soapbox of mine. We'll talk about another day. Those are times in the day when you know that you're going to have a harder time getting all, keeping all the students engaged because you have fewer hands.

Think about activities you can do during that time that are going to be more likely that the students will stay engaged more independently. Independent work might be a good one if the students are able to do independent work independently and if you have enough systems during that time for all the students who would need them. But if your students aren't independent or you don't have enough space for that many systems, you might think about something like a choice time.

I set up a choice time often after lunch, because that's when this happens, to work on leisure or play skills depending on your student's age, and they choose from specific stations that are set up, they're typically activities that are hands-on, less language involved, they're things that the students likely enjoy doing, they get to choose which ones they're going to go to so they're learning to make a choice and go to that choice. There are lots of things that you can teach in choice time in addition to the leisure and play skills which are important skills for our students to learn.

I have a blog post, actually I think I have a couple, that I'll put in the show notes about this, about what you're teaching, about how you do it, but because these are activities that the students generally like more, then they're going to be more likely to engage in them and stay engaged with less adult supervision, and you are still teaching it, they are not just downtime or fun time.

Just make sure that you time this time well so that you don't have it going on too long. If your timing seems too long, in other words, your students aren't stopping being engaged before the end of choice time, you might have to change stations before your time is up and mix it up to keep it going.

Another option during these times is to think about something like table tasks that I use my work boxes in that would eventually go into independent work. Maybe they're things that the students aren't independent at completely. I have a blog post about this as well. These are hands-on tasks that they're engaged with. They're already set up, the students get to the table, they're engaging with them, they have clear beginnings and ends, students know how to go about them, their expectations are clear. They're less likely to have a problem with them so they're able to handle them, doing them more easily than other kinds of tasks. It's a good way to find out what tasks they can do independently that you can put in independent work.

Finally, there will be times when you can't anticipate that there's going to be a breakdown when students are going to have free time. Maybe the principal comes in and needs you for something, a staff member is late coming back from a break, those are times that happen in every schedule. Trust me. It's not just you, there will always be those times.

When you see a speed bump coming or a student about to jump that engagement track, think quickly about what you can do to prevent that from happening. That's when you want to have a ready list of things that you can pull out to keep the students engaged. Maybe you have a list of ideas on the whiteboard so that you can grab them quickly on the fly. Choices or preferred activities for students that you can throw into the mix; it might be a box of fidget toys, it could be a music and movement where you just get up and dance to a song, pull out the Play-Doh, pull out the scrapbooks.

I have students who love to look at pictures of field trips and that's a highly preferred activity. It might be I had a teacher who used to be able to entertain kids with a bean bag for 20 minutes. He was amazing. It might be I spy game, it might be 20 questions. There's a lot of different things that you might work on, Duck, Duck, Goose, musical chairs, and you might just keep a list. I really like the idea of keeping a list. I really like the visual because those times I can't think and that way, I have a visual that I can go to.

But I also like it as a teacher because you set the model for the rest of the staff of where those ideas come from. They're not coming out of your mystery head so if you're not in the room, your staff knows when there's down time, that's where they pull their activities from and it's not just, "Well, we don't know what to do because those ideas always come out of her head," they know when there's a problem when there's a hiccup in the schedule, pull something from that list. It's a really great way to model. It's a really great way to save yourself a lot of headaches as well. It's a way to think ahead of ways to keep your students engaged and your students are going to be more likely to keep learning.

Those are some of the strategies that you can use to work at keeping students in that magic state of engagement. It's all about keeping that snowball rolling-rolling-rolling. It makes it so much easier to keep the day moving when that happens than when you have to back up and re-engage. It's almost like the clutch going out on a car and you have to restart in the middle of traffic, you really don't want to have to do that.

If you're looking for more ideas about how to keep challenging behavior at bay and prevent those behaviors from happening, come check out the free Preventing Challenging Behavior On-Demand Webinar. It's one of my really original titles there. You can watch whenever you want and you'll even get a bonus and a certificate of completion when you finish.

You can grab that link in the show notes and you can also grab it at the website for this episode at autismclassroomresources.com/episode128. I hope that you'll come back next week for another new episode on setting up the classroom. Until then, I'll just be rolling-rolling-rolling in the engagement over here. Have a great week.