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SPEAKERS

Chris

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. 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 Reeve. And today I want to share with you a podcast episode from the Special Educator Academy.

At this time, I'm not adding new episodes to the podcast because we already have so much content in the academy. But they are available to everyone. And we have 159 episodes in the Special Educator Academy that you can gain access to, once your trial is over to listen to in the a car, while you walk the dog, or you clean. And I'll be including some of them in our monthly theme material in the academy as well.

Now, this episode is pretty new and was recorded in mid June. It's about building rapport in your classroom between students and staff. It's based on research I reviewed in earlier podcasts. So you'll hear me refer to that in this episode. But I thought as we start to think about going back to school that this is something that many of us could use. Because I think as professionals in my world, we're all pretty good about saying that we need to build relationships with our students and pair ourselves with reinforcement. But what does that really mean?

So I'm using a research study from a lab mate of my graduate school Research Lab, to try to make this concept more concrete of building rapport between students and staff in the classroom. So let's get started.

Welcome back to the Special Educator Academy Show. Last week, I talked about the role of rapport in the classroom, and what the research indicates we can do to determine its role in addressing challenging behavior.

Now, this concept is not really new. Clinicians have talked for a very long time about the importance of building relationships with their patients. We talk a lot about building relationships with your students in the classroom.

Similarly, there's actually some early reports in the behavioral literature, looking at there were fewer behavior problems when the clients and the staff both seemed to be happy. So all of those things are things that indicate that we've known for a while that this has been a problem. But really, until we got McLaughlin and Carr's research, we don't have a lot of substantive research that supports that.

I find that many people out there though, even though we know this is important, talk about the importance of relationships with students, but don't really talk about what we can do to actually build positive relationships with students. So that is what we're going to talk about today because it's more than just about giving them candy.

So last week, I talked about the Magito-McLaughlin and Carr article on building rapport and ways of assessing rapport. And you can find those either in your podcast app, if you're listening to this as the private podcast, or on the web, just as the episode before this one, it's episode 157. Today, I want to focus on how those researchers evaluated changing a negative rapport to a positive rapport between clients and staff members.

So first off, one of the most common ways that we talked about building relationships with students, at least in special ed, and especially in a behavioral approach, is we talk about pairing ourselves with reinforcement. In fact, we talk about it in that phrase so often I have many people ask me, What in the world does that even mean? So I'm betting that most of you have heard that a time or two, you've probably heard it from me, as well. But what does it really mean? And isn't there more that we can do in addition to just pairing ourselves with good stuff? And the answer is, yes, there are other strategies that we should use to build rapport with our students. And that is what we're going to talk about today.

So let's start at the basics, which is pairing ourselves with reinforcement. But that's not just about delivering reinforcement for correct responding or delivering reinforcement for not having a problem behavior. Those are both parts of a behavioral program and they're not related to building rapport. This is about noncontingent presentation of reinforcement, which might also be used as part of a behavioral support plan. But in this particular usage, it's about pairing the staff member with non contingent reinforcement for the student.

So it's finding things that the student likes to do or likes to have, identifying them as daily reinforcers, they might be the same ones you use for instruction, you might pull them out of instruction, just use for this for a little while to make them more powerful, or they might be something you would never use for instruction. In instruction the students typically have to earn them. In this case, they're getting them for free, they don't have to do a thing.

It's important to note that McLaughlin and Carr used this as a way to increase the approach response of the client. So essentially, to get the client to approach the staff member and be more likely to come near them, to want to be around them. And it's not the only strategy for building relationships. I'm going to share a couple more with you today as well.

So they started by training staff in the protocols of the client's instructional and behavior plan, they needed to make sure they had the understanding of how to handle behavior, what was supposed to be put in place, using their schedules, all those kinds of things. Then they identified high priority reinforcers for the clients.

So they have to be things the client really, really wants or the student really, really wants, that were consistently chosen by the client or the students that were easy for staff to access, and that were easy for staff to deliver. So they didn't require having an extra staff member or a lot of time or monetary resources. So it wasn't like we're going to the movie in the middle of the school day. It was much more edibles and items that they can easily hand off to them.

And they work with the staff members to practice giving a daily high value reinforcer to the client at the beginning of each day's shift. Now this took place in a group home, so staff was coming and going. But you could do the same thing in your classroom, where you have the staff at the beginning of the day, just offer this reinforcer to the student, free of charge, nothing required. And then they assessed if after a few trials of that, was the client more likely to approach the staff member when they walked in the door?

So in your case, since the staff is usually there, when the kids come in, maybe the staff member gives that reinforcer when the kid walks in the building, does he start coming into your classroom and going straight for that person?

So after that has occurred for a few days, they assessed whether that approaching had increased. So what happens was after they just freely given the reinforcer with no expectations, they would just wait with the reinforcer in their hand a little ways away from where they usually work, and see if the client would come up to them.

And they would just make general statements like, Do you want a pretzel? I know you really liked bubbles, those kinds of things. So it's just making a comment about what you have as a reminder to them. That's a prompt. But it's a way of seeing well. they come up to you with that prompt. and then

... slowly, they would just kind of take that prompt away and see if the client will come up to them more regularly.

Remember that one of the ways that report was defined in this study was by client choice rankings of who they wanted to work with. So it's a good strategy of I'm going to be more likely to want to work with somebody who gives me good stuff without me having to do anything.

So if the client started approaching on their own, they increased the distance over time between the staff and the client. So they started just asking them to come a little bit farther. And if the client didn't approach then they just gave the reinforcer to them. So again, we're not reinforcing approach behavior, or giving a reinforcer we're just seeing will they drift closer to the person in order to see if they can get it?

Now, most of us would say this is not a true positive relationship. But we have to be able to have the two people coexist in the same space before we can work on any kind of relationship. If they are repelling each other, that does not work. So that's what this step was about.

Now, how do you get from pairing to a good relationship? So in addition to the daily reinforcer, the staff were also encouraged to deliver an additional item from among other occasional reinforcers that were on the menu. And in most cases, the items that were identified were more difficult to access. They required additional staffing or time or monetary resources.

So consequently, because they were more labor intensive, essentially, they were only required to make Those things available on a daily basis, rather than on a daily basis, they had to do it twice a week. So These might be things in your case, like going for a walk, playing a preferred game, talking about specific topics of interest, or going outside playing basketball was one, I had a kid that needed that. Going outside being on the swing.

So they're going to be more activity based most likely than concrete reinforcers, like food, or stickers, and they're going to involve a little bit more time. You're going to leave the room to take a walk, I'm going to go out to the basketball court for 10 minutes and play basketball. And that would only happen a couple times a week. Not all of them have to require leaving the room either if that's an issue.

That was another way of building not just the reinforcement value of the staff member. But it was about starting to find some things that they could work on what they called responsivity training, which was the second strategy. And I think this is one, that it can be really useful for some of our staff, it's essentially increasing the staff members responsiveness to the communicative acts exhibited by the participant.

The goal of responsivity training is to try to get the staff member more in tune with what this individual is trying to communicate with them. Now, that might be through behavior, it might be that they maybe they see as you know, you tell them, Hey, let's go outside, and they sit down on the floor. And that's a communication.

So they created a communication protocol for each client focused on how they communicate, and what it looks like. So it included five categories, their actions, their facial expressions, their gestures, their vocalizations, and their speech. And they included actions that we might think about, like challenging behavior. So someone says, let's leave and the client sits down. And if we prompt him, he tantrums, it's pretty clear that he sat down to indicate to you that he doesn't want to go, that that is a form that is a gesture of communication.

And if we interpret that, we can teach them a different one later. And if we interpret it for now is communication, our life might be a little bit easier.

So when we think about that, we want to think about how can we help this individual, the staff member, recognize what other people may be reading in this client on their own, which is how they are communicating. We may be, you know, you may be doing it without even realizing it. So trying to make that more concrete, pointing it out to them, showing them what their behavior looks like, that is really communication.

And then, after they've reviewed all of that, while the staff member was going through the daily approach training and giving the reinforcers, they got coached on what they call the three A Model. And so they coach them on how to first acknowledge all communication attempts. So sitting down is a communication attempt. Maybe we demonstrate what we'd like them to do instead, but it has a communicative function. And the first rule is acknowledge that. "I know that you want to stay here, but it's time to." "I see. Okay, you don't want to go. So do you want to go this way or that way?" So acknowledging that you recognize that they have attempted to tell you something.

Number two, is use the existing context to assess that's the second A, the function of the communication. So what is it that he's trying to tell you?

And the third is address those identified needs and requests whenever it's feasible. So if we don't have to leave the classroom right now, and we said, let's go and he sat down. "Oh, I see. You don't want to go. Okay." So I've assessed the function. I've given a verbal acknowledgment. And I'm going to say, "Okay, well, we'll, we'll wait five more minutes, and then we'll go." So maybe we didn't have to go. Maybe he didn't have to be the one to go check the mail, maybe a lot of different things. So we're going to honor that request, if we can, or that communication.

So then, what's the third A, the function of the communication? So what is it that he's trying to tell you?

So they illustrate this phase of intervention for Joan. During periods of jokes, and conversation. The staff member Alex was prompted to attend to Jones communicated attempts. So the jokes and conversation were Jones non contingent reinforcement that was that first step, and then they would prompt the staff member to attend to Joan's communicative attempts that were highlighted in her communication profile, which were making eye contact, laughing, nodding her head using words and joking.

So one day during an interaction Joan laughed at Alex's joke. In other words, she demonstrated a communicative act. She thought his joke was funny, Alex replied, you're laughing. In other words, he spontaneously acknowledged Joan's communication. And then he asked, Do you like my joke? So he assessed Joan's need or request for continuing that interaction. And when Joan replied, Yes, Alex further elaborated on the joke, he addressed that request that was identified by giving her more of what she was interested in.

She didn't say, Tell me another joke, or tell me more about the joke. But it was clear from that interaction, that that's what this is. This is a lot like social skills training. If you think about it, we're essentially training people to read each other signals. Our students don't always give off reliable signals to us. And we don't always give off reliable signals to our students. So it's kind of a co education kind of thing.

So I think we tend to think that everyone knows how to do this, particularly if we've been teaching for a while. But I'm guessing that if you work at it, you can remember a time that this didn't come so easily and that there's no reason to think that it would come easily for our staff members who may have no experience with individuals with communication problems or disabilities or anything like that. So that is one strategy to try.

The third strategy they use was called turn taking and reciprocity. So once in those reciprocity times, they found what the client really liked. They started to use that as a way to join them in an activity. Now you all know that I believe that turn taking and give and take is a great way to start working with students who have severely limited communication skills. It's a way to get into their world is to join in with what they're doing. Well, this is one way to do that, while also building it for the staff member, too.

So essentially, it involves identifying activities that the student likes. And then from that list, finding activities of the staff member also likes, and then having them engage in those mutually pleasant activities together, so that they're doing them together in a turn taking reciprocity kind of way.

But again, it's going beyond the simple sharing the pleasant experience, you do need to do some training with the staff to include the reciprocity and turn taking component.

So let's say that you've had a student who loves getting ready for lunch. And your staff member has

indicated that this is an activity that they're comfortable with and enjoy as well. So to get ready for lunch, maybe the student needs to get their lunchbox, and put their pizza in the microwave, take it to the cafeteria, put it on the table, and go get their silverware and a napkin.

In a reciprocity turn taking situation, the adult wouldn't do this all for them and they wouldn't have the student do every step either. Instead, maybe the student gets their lunchbox, and the staff member opens the microwave, the student gets out their pizza and puts it in the microwave, and the staff member puts in the time and the student presses the start.

Now, clearly, in this example, you have to differentiate between what are reciprocity activities and what we are striving to get independence on. So if heating up their lunch is an IEP goal, don't use it as a reciprocity activity, because you're not gonna get to independence in this way. But you can identify some activities that both the student and the staff member like doing, it might be playing game, it might be playing basketball, it might be going for a walk, if both of them are okay with it, and they both like doing it, then it can be a fun one, instead of being a skill based activity.

Then train the staff on how to make it reciprocal. So they aren't doing all the steps. And they're responding to the steps that the students engage in taking their turn and then letting the student to the next part.

So those are three strategies that were found to effectively increase rapport between staff members and clients in a group home situation. But there is no reason why we shouldn't think that they will also work in your classroom.

If these strategies are ones that you'd like more examples and training on, let me know and I'll make some Quick Wins about them. In the meantime, I'd love to hear that or anything that you're thinking about this in the Facebook group or in the community and I'd love to hear if you try some of these strategies in your classroom and how they worked out for you.

I will be back next week when we will be talking about these types of strategies, increasing rapport between staff members, which I'm really excited about. So until then, get some rest. Enjoy your summer. And I hope to see you again next week.

I really hope that you enjoyed this episode of the Special Educator Academy Show, We have all new tools and support coming in the new school year. We are just about to launch our monthly themes that will include printables from my store and videos to support the strategy of the month. We'll be kicking off the month with setting up classroom management and reinforcement. In addition to the monthly offerings, you'll also get access to all of the perks and elements of SEA like the back episodes of the podcasts that you just listened to. And the videos that you can download to train your staff, workshops, and courses that you can probably use for professional development.

Want to join the fun? The price is the same \$25 A month or \$250 per year. So less than the cost of a lot of conference registrations. And you can join with a free seven day trial at autismclassroomresources.com/sea-free-trial. But just know that you won't be able to access printables until you complete the trial period.

And an additional perk of joining and converting over from the trial to a regular member is that you get the opportunity to set up a 15 minute zoom call with me to help plan how you can get the most out of the academy to support the type of classroom and the teaching that you are doing. So that's just another kind of perk that goes along with staying with us.

If you want to do that immediately you can join without the free trial at autismclassroomresources.com/sea-monthly. And I will also put the link to the annual membership in the show notes along with both of those. And if you ever have any questions about the academy or you want to know more about it, feel free to drop me an email at Chris@autismclassroomresources.com. I hope you'll come back next week for another episode of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. And I'll talk to you later.

Thanks so much for listening to today's episode of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. For even more support, you can access free materials, webinars and Video Tips inside my free resource library. Sign up at autismclassroomresources.com/free. That's F-R-E-E or click the link in the show notes to join the free library today. I'll catch you again next week.