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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 I am excited to be your host. And we are going to start a new quick episode series on five tips in four different areas of the classroom to help you get off to a strong start of the school year.

For the next four episodes, except next week when I have a really great guest who has some amazing tips for working with families, the next weeks, I will have five tips that will help you get started either thinking about setting up your classroom, or actually getting it done in a way that lowers behavior and keep students engaged.

I know this is a crazy time of year, so I will try to make them short and succinct. But I have some really good tips for classroom management, for using visuals, for using reinforcement, and more. And I'll point you to some other episodes for each topic that will allow you to do a deeper dive on the topic if that's what you want.

Today's episode is going to kick us off by talking about overall strategies to put in place in the first week or two of school. Now, if you've been here awhile, you know that my motto is well begun is half done, I will spare you my Mary Poppins attempt at an accent. But that is because you can put strategies and systems in place at the beginning of the year so much easier, and you get more than that amount of time back as the year progresses.

So we are nowhere near half done. But I want to let you know that I have a free tool for implementing one of these five tips. So I'll talk about that in the full episode. Let's get started.

In last week's episode, number 174, I shared an episode from the Special Educator Academy about research on building rapport between clients and staff. The research talked about was done in a group home setting. But in the episode I talked about how we can apply it to the classroom. And if you want to go back and listen to that episode, you'll find it at autismclassroomresources.com/episode174.

The first two things on today's list of five are about building rapport and building relationships. And this is something that I see over and over again on social media. Sometimes it's phrased as relationships before rigor, which is attributed to Brad Johnson. Sometimes it's relationships before curriculum. But although all of those sayings sometimes seem trite, it really is true. Students are better behaved, they work longer and harder, and they generally do better when they trust the staff. When they know that they are respected. Essentially, this is what we often refer to as building a relationship with a student.

We talk about the importance of building relationships all the time. A lot of times behavior analysts will say you have to pair yourself with reinforcement. Does that mean that you have to flood them with cookies and candy? Does it mean you have to give them stickers all day long or that they get to be on the iPad all day long?

Let's take the example of the iPad because I know it's a really popular reinforcer for some of our students. That is actually one that doesn't qualify often for pairing yourself with the reinforcer unless you are interacting with the iPad too. Just giving him the iPad and saying hey, you go is it really enough to build a relationship? So I mean, you could give it to him all year and it still doesn't have an impact, basically your shelf where I go and get the iPad.

Instead, it's about making yourself part of the reinforcing experience. And it's about thinking about what they like and how you can make it better. One of the elements that I talked about in the last episode was what behavior analysts typically refer to as non contingent reinforcement. Essentially, it means giving reinforcers to the student for free. You don't require anything from them in order to get the reinforcement.

This is a strategy that the research article I talked about in last week's episode by Magito-McLaughlin and Carr really focused on. This is what they use to build rapport. All it means is that you involve yourself in their reinforcers, you give them away for free, and then you start inserting yourself into that exchange. So maybe you give the iPad away for free a little bit. And then when they start approaching you, because they know that you are the keeper of the iPad, then you can go and start saying, "Hey, I'm going to do this. And then you do this," and start slowly inserting yourself into that interaction.

Believe it or not, that research gives us a good starting place of where to start the year. What you're trying to do is essentially make yourself the person with the good stuff. And then, over time, as you get involved with it, as they start to approach you, and you start to insert yourself into their interactions, you start to take on some of those positive traits that the reinforcers have.

Another piece of building relationships with students can be to make the reinforcers or the activities they're engaged with better by being involved with them. So think of it like this, if you're working with younger children who love bubbles, if you give them the bubbles, many of them have difficulty getting them open, blowing them, and they don't end up getting a lot of bubbles to pop.

But if you come in, and you're a good bubble blower, and they can interact with you to get something better, because when you blow bubbles, there's lots of bubbles to pop, you become the reinforcer. You can play this particular example up too. Maybe you have the big bubble wands that blow the big huge bubbles. And that may make the activity more fun and reinforcing, while you're reinforcing interacting with you at the same time.

And for students who either maybe their student with autism who struggles to interact and doesn't really have a lot of approaching and attending to other people skills, or whether it's a student with say an emotional disability who has a lot of underlying assumptions about what interactions with adults might mean. Either way, you becoming that reinforcer and getting let into their world is a huge plus, to get the school year started.

To build these kinds of relationships with your students sit back and watch what they do, and how they react to things. Take the time to let them play with or interact with things that they like, and see what's possibly reinforcing for them. I do a bunch of reinforcer assessments at the beginning of the year, which means we basically just take out a bunch of stuff and do it. For young kids that might be taken out the bubbles and the wind up toys and the things like that.

For older students, it might be hey, let's do your nails at the beginning of work time today, let's get a manicure. Let's go play basketball, or something like that. Even if it's just a nerf basketball in the direct instruction area. Then you get to know what kinds of things might serve as a reinforcer for them. And they begin to associate you with the things that they like to do before they associate you with the work that maybe they don't like so much.

The second tip, and I promise that was the longest one is to build relationships with your staff. Now you can pair yourself with reinforcers here too. Sometimes you can do it really blatantly bring them coffee in the morning. And sometimes it's more subtle by complimenting what they're doing, putting their preferred break time on the zoning plan, really listening to what they're telling you about what they are either struggling with or enjoy doing in the classroom.

In order to build relationships with your staff, you have to get to know them. Find out how they like to work and what's important to them in the classroom. In my building classroom teams toolkit, I have suggestions for how to make this happen. When you have limited time alone with staff and limited time to interact with them in the classroom. I know you don't get to see them alone very much. And that does make it harder but there are ways you can do that. I'll put a link to that toolkit in the show notes for you.

You don't need to quiz them about your lives or about finding out about what they like to do, why they're there. You know, you want to make sure that you are doing it in a conversational manner, obviously, but finding out why they work in this classroom, what they like to do, what they don't like to do. What's meaningful for them, are all ways of letting them know that you respect them. And similarly to how we want to make sure we're watching for the signs of what our students do and don't like and making adjustments. We make adjustments for how long to work, how much to push, based on what we observe. It's like that with the adults as well.

So number three of this week's five tips is to use visuals. But even more than that, what I really want to emphasize is use more visuals than you really need. And by visuals, I'm talking about visuals for schedules, for giving information about classroom routines, and even the structure of the furniture and how it sends a message. Because here's the thing, it's pretty easy to drop visuals out of the rotation when a student is doing well and doesn't really need them to independently navigate the day or behave or things like that.

But if you start out the year without as much structure in the classroom as they need, and they get off track, and you try to come in and add it, that's a lot harder. It's a lot harder at that point, you can't just add visual, sometimes you have to unteach things they've learned and things like that. Sometimes you can do it. But sometimes their behavior has gotten more traction and requires more intervention, if we don't get off to that strong start. Don't worry that you're providing too much structure or too many visuals, I honestly don't think you can have too many visuals or too much structure. But the students will let you know when they don't need them anymore, and then you can fade them out again. So start with more visual supports. And I've got a whole episode where I've got five tips about visual supports, that we'll get out in a couple of weeks.

The fourth tip this week is to save your sanity, not necessarily it will make the classroom run better, but it will make your life easier. Prioritize each day. Make a prioritized list of what has to be done and what would be nice to have done. And don't expect, especially in the first few weeks, to get past the must be done list. And really, really think through that must be done list.

For instance, it feels like every visual in the classroom must be laminated before we use it. We all know they will last longer if we do that. But in reality, we could go a week or two with cardstock visuals without laminate and then replace them with laminated one, when there's more time. It's okay

if we have visuals and we've replaced them with better visuals. So sometimes we get stuck in that I don't have time to print and laminate, sometimes just print it out, cut it out, and use it. You can always come back and use a laminated piece later, when you have more time.

Be really diligent each day, and I do it at the end of the classroom day, about deciding what do you have to have done. And I start by thinking about what do I have to have done by tomorrow morning? What must be done before I walk in? And what can I let go a little bit.

I usually prioritize it by whether it will make a difference in the classroom overall, and whether it will help a student? Those are the things that I prioritize? Will it keep the students more engaged? Or will it help a student's behavior? Those are my priorities.

I had a student who thrived on social stories, and we would write them out immediately. We were lucky because he would read them. And so he didn't need pictures. But as soon as we would realize that we would need them, we would write them out. So I'm a ninja social story writer by the way, in case you didn't know that. So I can really, I've done so many of them I can literally just call them out of my head.

But this meant that a lot of his social stories got written on the whiteboard. One was written on the back of his schedule. One I think I wrote on the back of a napkin. At the beginning of the year, we didn't have time to make them pretty and luckily he didn't really need pictures. If it was on the whiteboard, I took a photo of it and we left it there. If it got erased by accident, we pulled out the picture on my phone and used that. Later in the year, we got them all typed up, we got him put in a notebook, and it was something he could go back and review. But in the meantime, we had a working copy that worked for us.

So be really ruthless with setting your priorities. You don't do anyone any good if you don't sleep or you're up all night, making visuals, working on your schedule. You know, if I know that I need changes in the schedule, I even prioritize what are the things I really have to do. The schedule is usually one, the actual will not the visual schedule, but the actual daily schedule is one I have to fix several times over the beginning of the year. And that often is my priority. And that means that sometimes I don't have enough visuals for those.

If you don't have time to make new visuals, cut out a picture from a magazine, draw a picture. Now I don't draw. I mean, I really don't draw. I mean, it's really bad. But I can make stick figures. And sometimes that's all I need. A stick figure next to something that sort of looks like a bus can mean it's time to go home. And we can use that until I had time to make a better one.

So prioritize what needs to be done each day, and reprioritize, the next day when things get added to the list. So you might find some of the things that you didn't get to yesterday might even just fall off the list maybe they aren't even needed as much

the list, maybe they aren't even needed as much.

And number five, stand back and reflect on what is working and what is not working every single day for the first couple of weeks. When the kids go home, just sit down and think about what was working and what was not. You can actually grab a free classroom setup troubleshooting worksheet in our free resource library, at autismclassroomresources.com/free. It has a section on what's working and what's not. It is just as important for you to evaluate what is going well as it is for you to figure out the problems.

I actually will jot things down on this list as the day goes by. And that helps because at the end of the day, my brain is kind of tired so this allows me to like write things out when I remember them. But put the things that aren't working and your brainstorm solutions for them on your priority list, and then figure out what needs to be done today before I go home.

And my general ranking is safety comes first. So if it's something that affects the safety of the students in the classroom, that's that's a must have. Then I look at engagement. Is it something that's going to increase the engagement of the class? that is something that is a priority. Then I have behavior support. Then I have which are more preventive long term strategies. Then I have learning. And then I have data. Because without all the other things, data doesn't really matter. If you don't have time to teach, taking data on that doesn't really help.

So those are kind of my priorities that I use for that. And I use the what's working, what's not with staff, I asked them to weigh in on that and all those kinds of things. So just to go back and go through them.

Number one is to build relationships with your students. Number two, is to build relationships with your staff, by associating yourself with good things and getting to know them. Number three, is use more visuals than you think you really need. All types of visuals. Number four is prioritize every day what absolutely must be done, and what it would be nice to have done. And do that at the end of every day, reprioritize. And number five, is stand back at the end of every class day in the first couple of weeks, and reflect on what's working and what's not, and make your adjustments accordingly.

So that's our five most important things that I think are going to start you off on a really good foot for the year. Next week, I'm super excited that we have a special guest who is going to talk about building relationships with parents, so I thought it really kind of tied in with our relationship theme of this episode. Then on August 15, I will be back with my best tips for using visual supports to the max.

Until then make sure that you grab your free reflection worksheet in the show notes or at autismclassroomresources.com/free. I hope that these tips have been helpful for you. If you listen to the podcast, it would mean a world to me if you went to Apple podcasts and left a review. I would love

to know your thoughts. And that really helps other people find it and if you have a friend that you think would benefit from it, share the link.

Until next week, I'll just be sitting here thinking about the year that I was at the first day of school in 18 schools all across the country in one month. I don't recommend it. But it started all those classrooms out really strong. 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.