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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 am Chris Reeve, and I am your host. We have been talking all about instruction in the last couple of months. So now that we have covered all the different elements that go into instructional loops, I want to talk about the kinds of skills that we teach in this episode and a couple of follow up.

Specifically, I'm going to talk about learning to learn skills today. Or sometimes we call them learning readiness skills. Essentially, they're skills that students need to learn to be able to sit, attend, follow directions. They're skills that many young children come into school already knowing, or they quickly learn them through the routines and the teacher attention in preschool and kindergarten.

But for students on the spectrum, and many of our students with other disabilities, these skills often don't happen as readily. They often don't learn them from watching the students around them until we explicitly teach them. So they don't know necessarily how to take cues from others to change what they're doing.

So this applies to students with autism. And applies a lot to preschoolers and early elementary, but I have seen middle and high school students who don't have the skills and we wonder why their performance seems so erratic. This might be one of the reasons. So I think it's worth talking about across the age range. So there's a lot to cover. Let's get started.

As I mentioned, learning to learn skills are definitely something that we teach to young kids in early intervention, but I've also had older students who haven't been taught the skills. And believe it or not, I've even had some students who ended up struggling in later Elementary, even though they had some academic skills, because they did not have a few of these skills. They didn't really have them down pat, they weren't good at following directions or attending when someone call their name. They were good at memorizing. So people let them get by thinking they knew the material. But then were surprised when they realized they weren't really learning the new material as the work got harder.

So for these students, we need to drop back. And we need to teach where the holes are in their skills. If they don't attend in some way to their name, we need to teach them that. That doesn't mean they have to make eye contact with us, they just have to give us some kind of signal.

So learning readiness skills are the skills that students need to have in order to take in instruction. They need to be able to discriminate and follow simple instructions when they're given. They need to be able to do what the instructor does, imitate a model. That's how we all learn. But that's especially how young children learn when language is a barrier.

So to do simple tasks to be engaged with instruction, they need to be able to recognize objects and pictures. And the beginning of that skill is simple matching. We match before we receptively and expressively identify items, it's a building block to other skills.

Now I know that many of the students that I'm talking about are also nonverbal. While communication is definitely a learning readiness skill, I put it in a category of its own, so I don't focus on it in the first key skills. Learning readiness skills wouldn't be the only skills you will be working on with these students. Instead, they'd have the academic component of their curriculum or their IEP might be the learning to learn skills. These are enabling goals that allow them to access the curriculum. And I've got some information about enabling goals that I'll put in the show notes.

So communication would be another domain of skills that they would work on. Just like fine motor skills, independence, toileting, and self help, etc. So let's look at the core learning of learning to learn skills more closely. And let me just say that these are just the beginning. All of these skills expand to more extensive complex skills that are still building on learning readiness. But for students who come to you without basic skills, these are where we start.

I start with attending to their name. Now we use to teach look at me as a direction. However, I'm always on the lookout for how instruction matches the natural environment, because many of the students I work with have significant difficulty generalizing their skills, and it helps if The cues are the same across environments. In addition, we have a large number of self advocates who will say that making eye contact is very distressing and often painful for them. And that Discrete trials that focused on attending by making eye contact, we're extremely punishing, really for them.

So we want to take all of that into account. I don't care as much that the person is making eye contact so much is that I just have a signal that they're listening, that they're hearing me. It could be a hand signal, it can be a lot of things.

And guess what, most teachers don't say, Look at me to get a student's attention until they're really, really frustrated. So essentially, when I was teaching, look at me, I was teaching my kids to frustrate their teachers. Instead, they give a direction to the class. Students at this stage of learning to learn aren't at the point where they're understanding that class directions apply to them as well.

So the next thing they do, if the student doesn't follow the class direction, is to say the student's name. So now I teach students to attend to their name using some kind of signal. For some kids that might be eye contact or orienting their face so that they're looking at me, maybe not making direct eye contact. But for some, it might be a hand signal or some other a verbal response if they're verbal to be able to say, I heard you. I just want to make sure that they heard and knew that that direction was for them.

Now, when it comes to attention, let me just say that it's not the length of how long that direction takes place that counts. It's visually checking in or some way of letting them know that they are attending. In this skill, we start with a small contained setting with just one student, one instructor, if you have that option. You can modify this if your staffing doesn't allow it or your student doesn't need to start this far back. And then gradually, we move to working on attending when their name is called in larger groups, and farther away.

Next up, is the skill of following simple one step directions. The key here is learning to follow the direction and then discriminating this direction from that direction. So it starts with simple directions like put in, give me five, and others that have objects and hand motions that go along with it. Because following a direction with an object is easier than one without because there's a visual cue. Later, you move to two step directions and following group directions. But this is where we start.

Students also need to learn to imitate others. Eventually, we want them to imitate the students sitting next to them, as well as adults. But we start with adults. And we will also want them to learn that imitation gives them cues about their environment about what to do. And again, because imitating with objects is an earlier developmental skill, we start with imitating with objects.

So that might be with a young student, I stack the blocks and say you do and I want him to stack the blocks in the same way. The key again, for him, is to know what he has to do is what I did. So not what I say like what I'm doing following directions, but what I did. So all I say is, you do or do what I do. Because many programs in learning to learn skills are designed for younger students, we tend to use a lot of younger kind of skills, ring a bell, stack the blocks, raise your hand, touch your nose.

But we also can have imitation for older students for actions that are more functional and less play oriented. So things like put a pencil in a jar, stir with a spoon. Those kinds of actions are what we want them to imitate. Once you can imitate with objects, we drop the objects and just work on things for younger students like clap hands, raise hands. And you can also choose the actions that make the most sense for your student based on their age and their needs.

And finally, we move to matching object to object and then matching object to picture and picture to picture. These, of course are important because they begin the process of understanding vocabulary being able to recognize and indicate that they know what vocabulary is, item recognition, and discriminating between items. And then the next step would be matching the objects to pictures. And then receptive idea of objects where I ask for an item and they give me a picture or an object of it.

So obviously, there are more skills that build on these skills over time. But these are the basic skills that I start with and these obviously go on to other things. There similar to the skills that you would see in a curriculum like the strategies are teaching based on autism research the STAR, which was one that I really like, or the ABLLS, or the VB-MAPP, or other kinds of ABA curriculum.

So your action item this week is to assess any students that you're struggling with during instruction, to see if they have the learning to learn skills of sitting and attending and following direction. And if not, think about a plan about how you can integrate those skills into your teaching with them each day. You don't have to teach them with Discrete trials, you can teach them in a more naturalistic setting.

And next week, I will be back talking about naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions and what that might look like for some of our different kinds of skills.

Thank you so much for tuning into this episode. If you found this episode helpful, I would love it if you would share it with a friend or colleague, or hop over to Apple podcasts and leave a review. And I always love to hear from listeners with their thoughts about episodes as well. So if you're listening to it and you like it, share it on Instagram and tag me and always feel free to DM me on Instagram @autismclassroomresources. Have an amazing week.

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