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SPEAKERS

Veronica

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 Dr. Christine Reeve and I'm your host, and you are listening to Episode 212.

And as I talked about in my last episode, there are different ways that sensory experiences of students might be related to the function of challenging behavior. It might be to escape from a situation that's too loud or too bright or too smelly, or all of those things together. It might be to get reinforcement for something that is internal or to end an internal feeling that is uncomfortable. And if you've missed that episode, I highly recommend you go back and listen at autismclassroomresources.com/episode211.

But today, I want to talk about how we can teach some of those individual replacement behaviors to help our students get their needs met. Without the challenging behavior. I've got a self-regulation freebie for you in the resource library that I will share at the end of this episode. And these are some of the most difficult replacement behaviors to identify and teach. So I'm going to cover some of those concerns as well. Let's get started.

So if we have a student who is overwhelmed by a situation or the sensory distress is causing the individual to have a meltdown, or have a challenging behavior, or not be able to cope with the situation, then we're looking at an external situation where we want to do two things, we want to help

them understand what is happening to them, and we want to teach them a way to remove themselves from the situation.

So we can just teach them to ask for a break. And it's something that maybe we start by seeing that they are showing signs of becoming overwhelmed. And so we start by queuing them to ask for that break. And I talked about ways that we can teach that break response in episodes 207 and 208.

And the methods and the variables that we would use would be the same, it's just important to remember that teaching an individual a way to let people know in an appropriate way that he needs to leave is really important. Because in many situations, especially in schools, simply walking away from a situation is not an option that's easily accepted. And we might accept it with an understanding that we know the student and we know what they need. And that's absolutely fine but that's probably not our best long term plan.

So most people who don't know the student aren't going to understand that. And so they're going to want them to give them some indication that they are making this choice effectively. So having them have a way to give someone a sign that they need a break is important. And it doesn't have to be somebody saying, "I need a break" or raising their hand. For some of my students, especially the ones who don't want to use strategies, which I've worked with quite a few of them who don't want the strategies to make them look different from the other students. One of the things that we do is we have them leave a card on their desk. So they get up and walk away, but they leave something in its place so that someone knows that they purposely did this, they didn't just wander away from the situation.

So essentially, what we're trying to do in this situation, is help the student to begin to recognize that they're getting overwhelmed, and too, to let someone know that they are leaving or need to leave.

Now obviously, helping them recognize that the sensory input is overwhelming is one that is harder to do because it involves identifying feelings that maybe we can't tap into, we don't always know that they're feeling overwhelmed. It's something that's happening internally. So that becomes a self regulation, which I'm going to talk about in number two. But we might use something like the five point scale where the students learn to rate their level of arousal based on the five point scale and it becomes something that I like because there's an easy shorthand of, "I'm feeling like a three. I gotta go," and that's a cue that I'm going to go and calm myself down.

And there are a number of other tools that we can work on identifying when something is overwhelming as well. That's a much longer than this podcast, but I will talk about that in number two. I will have some links in the show notes as well to some posts about this specific topic.

And the second part of this is actually teaching someone to learn how to ask for a break from a situation or let someone know that they need to leave or remove themselves from a situation. And it's

situation or let someone know that they need to leave or remove themselves from a situation. And it's no different than if I am in an overcrowded room and I'm feeling kind of overwhelmed, I might just turn to the person I'm with and go, I'm going to run to the restroom. Because that's a quiet place and I can move. For some of my kids, I teach them just ask to go get a drink of water, so that they have a way to kind of go walk away from the situation, get distressed a little bit, and then they're going to hopefully be able to come back.

So I talked in Episode 206, at autismclassroomresources.com/episode206, about how to teach asking for a break. And so the situation and the strategies that you use for that are very similar. You're not necessarily going to create the sensory overwhelm for them, because that's just irrational. But instead, we're going to create situations where we practice asking to leave somewhere.

I actually have a behavioral toolkit for teaching students some calming strategies, and teaching them how to ask for a break. That's my calm down toolkit. And you can find it in my store at autismclassroomresources.com/calmdown all one word. And I'll make sure that's in the show notes as well.

The second thing we can do for sensory related issues are to teach self regulation. Because sometimes the person cannot escape from a situation that is overwhelming. Imagine that you are in an airplane, and a baby is screaming. If loud noises bother you, and headphone wearing bothers you, there's no place else to go. Which is one of the reasons why many of our families really struggle with situations like that at times, because the situations are so overwhelming for everyone. We want to give them away to be able to deal with it.

Now for some students, it might be teaching them to desensitizing them to wearing headphones or finding headphones that will work for them. Or it might be teaching them other types of strategies where they are reducing the impact on their nervous system like yoga nidra, or other things. And I'll do an episode in the future on some specific, calming down strategies that we can teach for self regulation.

Fire drills are another really good example. We have to get everybody out during a fire drill. I am very big on the idea that we don't just decide that we're going to tell people when the fire drill is and leave before it. Unless that's part of a bigger teaching plan leading to being able to understand that when the fire alarm goes off, I can't cower under the desk, I have to leave the building. Because lifetime again, person's not necessarily going to grow out of this if we don't teach them the coping strategy. The coping strategy is, put my hands over my ears and leave and then I don't hear it anymore. But they have to learn that skill.

Similarly, if the sensory experience is something that isn't outside of them, but instead is internal, like anxiety, or anger, I realized as they're both emotional phrases, that is not how behavioral Analysts usually talk. But they are real things. I think we would all say that there have been times that we have

been angry, that we have been anxious, they are internal feelings, they are internal events for us. Walking away from that obviously isn't an option because it's inside you.

So at that point, the person needs to be able to have strategies to reduce those inputs. So to help for those situations, it's really important that we teach individuals ways to calm themselves down, to reduce the impact on their nervous system, and to maintain their behavior while it's going on.

So some ways that we might teach that might be teaching relaxation skills, teaching specific breathing strategies, there's a lot of evidence in the research that shows teaching mindfulness can be a really good way to do this. There is a protocol called non sleep restorative rest, which is taken, it's actually a non theological component of what's also called Yoga Nidra. That is a way that has been definitely shown to reduce blood pressure, to reduce heart rate, to reduce breathing, to reduce that internal anxiety or that internal feeling and to kind of calm down the nervous system.

Those are all strategies. Might be to seek self monitoring skills to prevent those feelings from escalating, things like the five point scale. And again, I'll direct you to a post on that in the show notes. But in fact, I have a number of posts on anxiety, and a podcast episode that I will put in the show notes for you. If you're looking for the podcast episode, you can find it at autismclassroomresources.com/episode124 for how anxiety fits into the behavioral communication connection piece.

So I also have a self-regulation toolkit in my store that focuses on teaching students to manage anxiety, you can find that autismclassroomresources.com/anxietytoolkit. But you can also download a free square breathing visual to help students learn some breathing strategies that can help them think about box breathing. You've heard about to help them learn some breathing strategies that can help them to cope with anxiety, and other types of sensory situations that may be overwhelming. Help them to reduce that internal stimulation. And you can find that in our free resource library, you can sign up at autismclassroomresources.com/free.

And finally, the third thing that we want to think about is sometimes we have a student who engages in challenging behaviors, because it creates an internal reinforcer for them. And in that case, we want to think about how can we replace that sensory experience for them with a more appropriate behavior.

Now, this is probably the hardest one to deal with, because it's difficult to find replacements that are appropriate and really replace the sensation. And when I say appropriate, I mean something that isn't hurting them, that isn't hurting someone else, that helps them to get that need met, and over time perhaps makes it look more typical in the environment. That's not my first concern. My first concern is that they are safe. My first concern is that we are teaching them away to get that in a way that's maybe not picking at their cuticles until they bleed or tearing off their shirt. We're looking for behaviors that are going to replace them and be non harmful.

So if I have a student who picks maybe I've had a number of students who pick at their cuticles, it might mean finding something else for them to pick out. So you might use a Koosh. For another student, we had a student who liked to play with his spit on his desk with his fingers. So we thought about what that sensation felt like. And we put finger paint with hand sanitizer in a Ziploc bag, we glue gunned it shut up and taped it to a cookie sheet, so that he could play with that same type of viscosity of liquid on his desk with his fingers that didn't involve spit.

If you've ever had a student who vocalizes constantly, sometimes it's humming, sometimes it's yelling, sometimes it's making a noise and repeating the same statement over and over.

First, you need to find out what that sensation is actually reinforcing it. So for instance, in the case of noises, is it a sound where they're hearing it? Or is it the vibration in their throat that they're feeling, and you might figure it out. But try playing music or noise in the background. Or if they wear headphones does the behavior stop? If that's the case, then maybe the noise is what's reinforcing. If that reduces the noise making. If that does it, reduce it, then try putting a vibrating toy on their neck and see if that reduces the sound. It may be that vibrating sensation is what you're trying to replace. Once you figure that out, then you can teach them how to access that type of reinforcer and teach them to request it and use it in an appropriate way.

So those are some strategies for addressing challenging behaviors that may be related to automatic reinforcement or the need to escape from sensory experiences. Now, clearly, these are just ideas to get you started. And it will take a team of professionals to be successful with it. But hopefully it gives you some tips and some ideas to start.

You can grab the free square breathing visuals at autismclassroomresources.com/free in the resource library. And if you're looking for the behavioral toolkits with social stories, visual supports, and ideas and tips and protocols, check that autismclassroomresources.com/calmdown and autismclassroomresources.com/anxiety.

Next week, I will be switching gears a bit and talk a little bit about how students' behavior affects adult behavior in the classroom and how that impacts our students' behavior. So you aren't going to want to miss this because it happens to all of us and it can really make a difference in the classroom. So I hope that you will come back then, and until then I will 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.