Teachers' Corner

Enhancing Social Skills in an Inclusive Classroom

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Social and behavioral skills deficits are among the most challenging areas for students with autism and for students who are at risk for behavioral difficulties. The lack of these skills may affect the ability to contribute during activities that demand discussion and collaboration with others. School-wide behavior plans and classroom-level support may not fully address the social growth needs of these students (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Social narratives, video modeling, peer mentoring, and technology-aided interventions are all evidence-based practices that support behavioral and social development (Wong et al., 2015; Wong, 2013). Sometimes, however, one method does not work with a student, and teachers need to develop a comprehensive approach (Zamora, 2013).

Social narratives—also referred to as short social stories—describe specific social situations that may be ambiguous, confusing, or problematic for children with behavioral concerns. These situations are presented in a visual format, showing cues and appropriate social responses to people, events, and concepts. Students are encouraged to recognize the social cues that could trigger an appropriate response to similar situations independently and appropriately. Research indicates social narratives help students understand the feelings and behaviors of others, decrease fear and aggression, introduce changes in routine, and teach appropriate social responses to specific social situations (Gray, 2013; Wong, 2013).

Video modeling is another instructional method that addresses the behavioral disconnect between two social situations (e.g., the classroom or hallway) and social confusion experienced by children with autism and other behavioral concerns (Wong et al., 2015). Through the use of short video segments, it promotes appropriate behaviors in targeted settings. The use of videos of peers who are modeling specific social skills and videos that include the participant (often referred to as video self-modeling) has been used to teach and maintain new social skills, such as appropriate social initiation and interaction and conversational skills (Buggey, Hoomes, Sherberger, & Williams, 2011).

Peer mentoring not only improves the behaviors and social skills of students with disabilities; general education peers who serve as mentors also benefit (Bellini & Akullian, 2007). Using peer mentors who provide real-life examples of the desired skills makes it easier for students with behavioral issues to follow the steps involved in the skills, and it helps in creating concrete visuals while providing increased chances for social engagement.

Technology-aided instruction has also been used to support students' goals (Wong et al., 2015). A number of studies support the efficacy of iPads and related devices in the delivery of social narratives and video modeling to teach a variety of replacement behaviors, including social and behavioral skills and transition behaviors in inclusive classrooms (Cihak, Kildare, Smith, McMahon, & Quinn-Brown, 2012; Kagohara et al., 2013).

Zamora (2013) found that a comprehensive approach using all four practices yielded increased social awareness and improved behavior with two 9-year-old males—one who was

identified as having autism and the other identified by the school team as at-risk for behavioral difficulties. Both students were displaying off-task behaviors in an inclusive classroom, such as difficulty with sitting and attending to tasks, following directions, participating in a lesson, and coping with authority, and they were unable to maintain positive relationships with peers. A previous intervention using social narrative alone had not yielded substantial growth.

Zamora created a social narrative based on the targeted behaviors that were eliciting various inappropriate responses. Peers from the school acted out the narrative, which was filmed and uploaded to an iPad. This video, which depicted correct and incorrect responses, was used as an instructional tool during before-school peer mentoring sessions with a model peer who helped to reinforce the appropriate skills. Video modeling captured the students' behavior during observation sessions in the general education classroom, which were recorded on the iPad. The students viewed and discussed these short video segments during peer mentoring sessions, held 2–3 times per week. Zamora collected and reviewed data after each session for each of the target behaviors and created a graph of data sets.

After eight weeks, the target behaviors—attention to tasks, hand raising, and academic responding—had all increased. Both students expressed how they felt when they made positive behavioral choices: they shared a heightened sense of belonging with peers in the general education classroom and took pride in their improvements. Additionally, strong friendships emerged as a result of the students spending time together, the encouragement they gave one another, and the attention and reinforcement received from each other and the model peer. This study supports the notion that it is possible to combine evidence-based practices when one approach is too limiting. For example, since students with autism thrive on visual stimuli, integrating video modeling may elicit a higher transferability of behaviors to inclusive settings than the use of social narratives alone. Because this intervention was designed and implemented in a local setting, using resources generally available in most schools or easily adapted, teachers might consider incorporating these elements to develop similar interventions. ∎

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