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Attention to Task and Work Completion: Helping Handout for School

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INTRODUCTION

There are various reasons why students have difficulty attending to tasks and completing their work. These include specific developmental issues, mental health concerns, or academic or social skill deficits that hinder a student's ability to perform the work. Also, having knowledge or skills that exceed those of their classmates, or having any number of internal or familial concerns, could affect a student in the classroom. Thus, a teacher's role in maintaining students' attention and cultivating the ability to complete work in a class full of students can certainly be challenging.

The more engaged students are, the more opportunities they have to learn and achieve academically. Students who are not engaged in the classroom are vulnerable to distractions and are more likely to be disruptive. Instruction is interrupted when a teacher has to take the time to redirect a student, which can lead to a negative relationship between the teacher and student over time. Also, other students often become distracted by the disruptive student's behavior, which affects their own learning. Thus, a teacher's skillful management of the classroom can have a powerful influence on student engagement and learning.

In addition to the academic consequences for students, disruptive behaviors are also associated with deficits in social functioning. Oftentimes, the same issues and behaviors that result in a lack of attention in the classroom also negatively affect a student's social competence. Students who develop a negative reputation by getting into trouble frequently become

less appealing playmates. The peer rejection such students may experience can lead to more severe conduct problems (Miller-Johnson, Coie, Maumary-Gremaud, & Bierman, 2002), because they essentially give up on trying to form positive relationships with others. Teachers can be on the lookout for students who are rejected by peers and can be central in facilitating connections among students. No other specialists in the school will know all of the students in the class and understand the classroom dynamics as well as the classroom teacher.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Age and developmental stage are important factors when considering a particular intervention. That stated, the interventions used to promote attention to task and work completion are similar regardless of developmental characteristics. It is the design of the intervention that varies. For instance, with students of high school age, a behaviorally oriented intervention might consist of group contingencies (described below) that would be implemented with the unique social composition of the group in mind. Age-appropriate rewards, such as bonus points or computer time, would be put in place.

Students' unique academic, socioemotional, and behavioral needs are always important considerations in the selection of interventions as well. For instance, students should always be set up to be successful (we want them to earn the reinforcers!); therefore teachers must ensure that students have the skills necessary to meet the goals of interventions that are put in place.

In the beginning, reinforcement should be provided frequently or upon completion of simpler tasks. Then, as students become more proficient at demonstrating the desired behavior, teachers can raise the bar in the direction of the ultimate goal. Of the disabilities that are known to affect attention, the most prevalent is ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; see *ADHD: Helping Handout for School)*, which has a known biological basis that leads to a lack of focus (see Gelbar & Bray, 2015). Interventions to increase attention among these students include behaviorally based programs, such as those described here, as well as medication.

Teachers are also likely to be more successful by remaining flexible and being understanding of each student's home environment. Carefully considering students' home environments and the barriers they face—in terms of being at school and being ready to meet behavioral and academic expectations—could be the difference between turning a student around and turning him or her off. Further, collaborating with parents can have many benefits. Understanding how behaviors might differ at home and at school can provide insight into the underlying issues the student is struggling with, which may help inform intervention. Additionally, the family's culture needs to be taken into account. A lesser emphasis on structure and focused attention are the norm in some cultures. Teachers can convey the norms of the school environment and classroom expectations to caregivers. Teachers can also ask caregivers directly to provide their perspectives in order to address concerns both in and outside of the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A critical part of classroom management is preventing behavior problems, including difficulty attending to tasks and not completing work. However, even the best teachers cannot prevent these problems 100% of the time in all students. Thus, interventions for both preventing and responding to such problems are needed and are included below.

Preventing Problems of Attending to Tasks and Completing Work

A positive and supportive classroom environment promotes attention to tasks and completion of work and reduces the occurrence or recurrence of disruptions. Such an environment includes positive teacher–student relationships; students are more

likely to be engaged in classrooms in which they view their teachers as caring and supportive (see Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Although the preventive interventions in this section help build and maintain positive teacher–student relationships, they are more specific to problems of attention and work completion. They emphasize antecedent behavioral strategies—specific research-supported actions of teachers that promote attention to tasks and work completion.

1. ***Develop a set of classroom rules (no more than five) that are positively stated.*** Encourage students to participate in the development of the rules to instill in them a sense of belonging and ownership in their classroom. Explicitly teach the rules to students by discussing the rules and why they are valuable to the class on multiple occasions. Post the rules in the room to serve as a constant reminder. Implement consequences for not following the rules consistently.
2. ***Arrange students' seats in a way that allows the teacher to move throughout the room during lessons.*** This arrangement will allow you to be in close physical proximity to students when making requests or providing praise. Maximize open space in the classroom and avoid crowding. Use visual dividers to define spaces and reduce distraction.
3. ***Increase engagement by providing students with more opportunities to respond.*** Using response cards allows the teacher to ask more questions of the whole class. Students raise their cards to respond, allowing for a quick check-in and active student participation from the whole class simultaneously. The cards can take many forms, including a piece of paper taped to a popsicle stick with "yes" or "true" written on one side and "no" or "false" on the other side; or the method could use a series of three cards: green, yellow, and red, to indicate to the teacher whether to continue, slow down, or go over a concept again.
4. ***Provide immediate, enthusiastic, and varied positive comments following appropriate student behavior.*** Behavior-specific praise should feel genuine to the student and be clearly connected to the desired behaviors. Provide *much* more praise than corrective feedback. Recommended ratios are anywhere from 3:1 to 5:1 of positive remarks to reprimands or redirection. Therefore, the students who require the most redirection will also require the most positive reinforcement. For these students, it may sometimes be difficult to "catch

them being good," but praise can be given for very simple behaviors. Often when students are doing what is expected, their appropriate behavior is overlooked. Examples might include saying things like "Great job sitting quietly while we get ready for math," or "I really appreciate that you have your book out so we can get started."

Responding to Problems of Attending to Tasks and Completing Work

For the teacher in the position of responding to existing difficult student behavior, there are several available strategies to consider. Positive reinforcement is as powerful an intervention strategy as it is a tool for preventing disruptions. Several of the strategies listed here involve the use of positive reinforcement in different ways.

5. ***Implement a token economy.*** In this type of system, distribute points (e.g., check marks, stickers) toward a desired reinforcer (e.g., tangible items: small toy, candy; time for activities: iPad/computer game, free play; a homework pass; appointment as a helper in the classroom: pass out papers, collect/organize materials) as students exhibit desired behaviors. The reinforcer that the student is working toward must continue to be very motivating for that particular student. Deliver the points *with* verbal praise. Deliver the points frequently enough that the student continues to be successful and remains invested in the program.

6. ***Use Mystery Motivators.*** This intervention is a variation of the token economy program that can be used with one or more students. First, determine the target behavior and the students eligible to participate in the intervention program. Then, determine how many tokens the students need to earn the reward. Traditionally, the teacher would write a reward on a piece of paper and place it into an envelope with a question mark on the outside. The envelope would then get taped to the board as a visual reminder to students, who then work toward an unknown reward, which has been shown to increase motivation. More recent variations of this approach might include the use of "magic pens" with invisible ink to write down the reward or rewards, which are revealed after students earn the set number of tokens. Another possibility is to use a spinner that has different colored pie sections. Students flick the spinner and earn the reward that corresponds with the section's

color, but only the teacher knows which rewards are associated with each color ahead of time. The color sections can vary in size, so the bigger ones correspond to simpler rewards (e.g., pencils), whereas the smaller slivers of the pie correspond to more sought-after rewards (e.g., pizza party or extended computer time).

7. ***Use group contingencies.*** There are three different types of group contingencies—dependent, independent, and interdependent, as follows:
   - *Dependent group contingency.* Provide the entire group of students with a reward when the target student or students meet the criterion. Therefore, in this intervention, the group is dependent on the individual student or on a small group of students. This may result in the other students helping those with difficulties, such as by encouraging them to behave appropriately and ignoring their inappropriate behaviors, so that together they can earn the reward for the class. With the possibility of receiving help from and earning rewards for their classmates, the target student or students improve relations with peers as well. Monitoring can ensure that target students in a dependent group contingency continue to be encouraged and are not punished by their peers if they do not earn a reward for the class.
   - *Independent group contingency.* Allow all students the opportunity to earn the reward but provide the reward only to those students who meet the criterion. In this type of program, students work independently toward the goal and so may be motivated to compete with others in the class.
   - *Interdependent group contingency.* Provide the reward to all students only if all students meet the criterion. In this type of program, therefore, each student is dependent on the other students. This method can encourage students to work together as a team, or at least to support one another to earn the reward (see Theodore, Bray, Kehle, & DioGuardi, 2004).
   Class Dojo is an online framework that could be very helpful in setting up group contingency programs (see Recommended Resources).

8. ***Implement the Good Behavior Game.*** This intervention is a type of interdependent group contingency that involves two or more teams of students competing to earn the reward. First, divide

the class into teams and offer a reward contingent upon good behavior being exhibited by everyone on the team. Award a team a point if any member engages in a prespecified *undesirable* target behavior. The winning team in this case is the team with the fewest points at the end of the period. In addition to winning by earning fewer points than the other team, each team may also be held to an upper limit of points the team can earn to receive the reward (see Ortiz, Bray, Bilias-Lolis, & Kehle, 2017). Ensure that all students are able to meet the criterion that is set. These programs are designed to help increase the frequency of behaviors already in the student's repertoire. (See the *Implementing the Good Behavior Game: Helping Handout for School*.)

9. **Give students movement breaks.** Giving students breaks from sitting has been shown to increase concentration. Lead the whole class in brief movement breaks (e.g., various stretches, hopping, dancing, or yoga) geared at increasing circulation, encouraging an appropriate outlet for excess energy, and preparing students to continue to work. Allow students who might benefit from additional movement breaks, including those with ADHD, to increase their movement at regular intervals, such as having them write on the board, run an errand out of the classroom, or help with class chores (e.g., passing out and collecting supplies).

10. **Guide students through various relaxation strategies.** Relaxation strategies can be useful in helping students focus and attend to tasks in the classroom. The strategies may be particularly helpful in transitioning and regrouping after a stimulating break from the curriculum, such as an exciting assembly or a special event, or if students are experiencing higher than usual levels of stress, such as during periods of high-stakes testing:

    - *Mindfulness.* Teach mindfulness by fostering a culture of acceptance in the classroom that some things are out of our control. Teach students that we can learn a lot from our mistakes and encourage students to challenge themselves. Help students develop the ability to respond in stressful situations by remaining calm, rather than by reacting, and ask students to pause and take a deep breath with you when situations become heated.

    - *Progressive muscle relaxation.* Instruct the class or a group of students to sit comfortably in their seats and to close their eyes. First, ask

them to take a deep breath in and to notice the feeling of fullness in their lungs. Then, ask them to slowly release the breath. Next, instruct students to focus their attention on their left foot as they curl their toes in and tighten their whole foot, holding it tightened and noticing the feeling of tension. Instruct students to slowly release the tension as they exhale and to notice the feeling of relaxation in their foot. Move through the entire body like this, one muscle group at a time, instructing students to slowly tense and release their muscles and to note the feelings of tension and relaxation each time.

    - *Guided imagery.* Instruct the individual or group of students to sit comfortably in their seats and to close their eyes. Then instruct them to imagine a safe, tranquil place where they feel relaxed and comfortable. You may need to give them some examples, such as an empty beach, their bedroom, or a clearing in the woods or a meadow. Then guide the students through each sense, one by one, by concentrating on the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that they are experiencing in their special place. You might instead choose to read students one of many guided imagery scripts that you can find for free on the Internet. Some scripts involve visualizing some sort of release of stress, for instance by vacuuming up worries out of the body and mind and then releasing the contents of the vacuum bag into space, or by removing a heavy backpack of worries.

11. **Use the daily behavior report card (DBRC).** The DBRC is a tool for behavior change in the classroom that relies on reinforcement for good behavior being given at home. Not only does the DBRC help to maintain communication between home and school, but parents are active participants in the program. For the tool to be successful, parents must be on board and follow through in providing specific reinforcements every time, but only when the student meets the behavioral goals set by parents. The following is a broad overview of the steps involved in this program:

    - *Step 1.* Determine which behaviors will be the target for the intervention through discussions with parents. The behaviors should be explained in simple, measurable terms that will make it easy to determine how the student performed.

- *Step 2.* Determine how the behaviors will be rated. Behaviors may be marked simply on completion, on a scale based on percent completed; or on quality, such as needs improvement, satisfactory, or exemplary.
- *Step 3.* Determine the specific rewards and consequences for not meeting the goals. The teacher fills out the DBRC and sends it home with the child every day. Every evening, parents check the DBRC and give the student praise or a reward, or they discuss strategies for meeting the goal the next day.

12. **Try video self-modeling (VSM).** VSM is a technique derived from social learning theory that works to change learned behaviors. It also promotes generalization and maintenance of newly learned skills (Bray & Root, 2016). Therefore, if the behavior is significantly different across two independent settings, VSM may be a good fit. In terms of attention, VSM has been used to increase attention in those with and without ADHD (see Bray & Root, 2016). There are two basic steps to using VSM:
    - *Step 1.* Record the student performing the targeted behavior in an exemplary fashion (parent permission should be obtained). To obtain this recording, the student can be cued or the video can be edited to take out all instances of the inappropriate behavior. For example, if attention to task is the goal, the video footage would be gathered throughout the day and the instances of poor attention would be edited out.
    - *Step 2.* Set the student up to view the video about three times each week. By regularly viewing himself or herself paying attention and completing the work successfully, the student becomes more proficient at doing so in new settings. VSM has impressive effects with a strong research backing.

    Request written permission from the parents of any student who will be captured on the video.

13. **Teach self-monitoring strategies.** The general approach to self-monitoring involves devising a simple, age-appropriate method for tracking student behavior. The method and form for recording behavior can be as simple as asking the student to choose between a happy, neutral, or sad face at the end of a class period. For older students, a more sophisticated rating, such as a percentage or letter grade, might be more appropriate. Teach the student how to rate his or her own behavior, while you also rate the behavior on the same scale. Then discuss the two sets of ratings. At first, reinforce the student's behavior when the ratings match yours, whether the behavior is considered appropriate or not. Once the student has demonstrated the ability to consistently provide an accurate self-assessment, the student should be reinforced, but only if *appropriate* behavior is recorded correctly. (See *Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home* for additional recommendations related to self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement.)

14. **Consider the need for an assessment.** Children with ADHD often have comorbid academic, social–emotional, and behavioral problems. Although the symptoms of ADHD manifest in different ways, what differentiates these children from their peers is the frequency and intensity of their inattentive, impulsive, and hyperactive behaviors, which ultimately affect their learning and social behaviors. Parents may wish to consult with their school psychologist to discuss the possibility of an evaluation when these issues become prominent. Significantly, given the concomitant learning issues that often accompany ADHD, a cognitive and achievement assessment likely should be conducted at this juncture to rule out any learning disabilities. Further, as many symptoms of ADHD often overlap with other behavioral disorders, a thorough clinical and developmental history should be conducted as well as classroom observations and teacher, parent, and student evaluations of social–emotional behavior. These assessments are critical in identifying children who have not only ADHD but also other potential disorders that need to be addressed (e.g., depression).

    If a child is diagnosed with ADHD, one beneficial strategy may be to conduct a functional behavioral assessment, to identify the triggers of a particular behavior, the actual behavior, and the consequences that stem from the antecedent of the behavior. Once these have been identified, a behavioral plan may be developed to systematically work on the issues specific to the child. The plan, or behavior contract, should be discussed and explained so that the student is aware of the expectations and of how the system of rewards and consequences will work. Ideally, this plan should be a

collaboration between home and school. When teachers and parents are all on the same page with respect to the student's daily behavior, it creates a collaborative working relationship in which good behaviors are rewarded not only at school but at home as well. Once parents, teachers, and students can identify and agree on target behaviors and rewards and consequences, the arrangement opens the way for problem solving and reflecting. The same approach should be applied with respect to consequences of inappropriate behavior. Behavior contracts have myriad benefits, including holding students accountable for their actions, helping them self-regulate their behavior, and providing specific feedback on behaviors.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-intervention-modification

Intervention Central provides a tool for selecting research-based strategies to help with classroom management and many other behavioral and academic skills.

https://www.classdojo.com/

The Class Dojo website offers a free electronic classroom management tool for the tech-savvy teacher and wired students. It is also a great tool for encouraging a strong home–school partnership.

https://www.mindyeti.com/

The Mind Yeti website provides access to free guided mindfulness meditations for kids.

https://www.gonoodle.com/

GoNoodle provides free access to hundreds of videos to lead guided movement breaks in the classroom.

Books and Materials

Jenson, W., Rhode, G., & Reavis, H. K. (2009). *The tough kid toolbox*. Eugene, OR: Pacific Northwest.

This book contains information and actual classroom-friendly tools that can be reproduced for multiple uses in order to help manage difficult behavior in the classroom.

Jenson, W., & Sprick, M. (2014). *The tough kid: On task in a box*. Eugene, OR: Pacific Northwest.

This set of materials focuses on students with attention issues and guides the educator through the steps of the process from referral to classroom-based lessons to fading interventions. Additional materials, including timers, a peer-modeling DVD, and a reward spinner, are included, in addition to reproducible forms.

Rhode, G., Jenson, W., & Reavis, H. K. (2010). *The tough kid book* (2nd ed.). Eugene, OR: Pacific Northwest.

This original resource in the Tough Kid series helps educators set up the classroom environment for success, including basic tips for managing disruptive student behaviors.

Related Helping Handouts

ADHD: Helping Handout for Home
ADHD: Helping Handout for School
Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School
Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home
Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for School
Implementing the Good Behavior Game: Helping Handout for School
Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home
Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School
Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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