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## Autism E-News

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The Fine Dance of Individualized Teaching and Learning (Part 1)

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## Program Choreography: The Fine Dance of Individualized Teaching and Learning (Part 1)

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There has been growing awareness, acceptance and training regarding the use of structured teaching strategies as developed and presented by the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped CHildren (TEACCH) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As I work with professionals in the field trying to improve their skills in working with those with a disability on the autism continuum, I am often asked questions about the implementation of programming ideas I

present. One question rarely asked until teachers get into the process, but a problem that almost invariably comes up, is how to coordinate all of the schedules in one classroom where a number of students have individual programs. Putting into action a system for working through this process can make this type of classroom run smoothly and very effectively meet the needs of each student at his/her level.

First, it is of utmost importance that the classroom be organized based on the basic principles as set forth by TEACCH. These are that the classroom should operate through structure and that the three elements of structure are the physical arrangement, schedules and teaching methods. As well, TEACCH approaches all recommendations with the following concepts accepted. They are that we need to have a working knowledge of autism, programming should be based on individualization, programming begins with assessment, we should use empirically-based methods, there should be an orientation in our thinking toward independence of the student and we should work in collaboration with parents.

Physical structure of the environment can be summarized this way. The environment should communicate expectations and organization to students. Areas should be clearly defined, even if they are revolving areas that are used for several activities. That is, when an area is designated for a particular purpose, the furniture arrangement, materials and visuals should indicate to the students the expectations during the time the area is in use. For instance, many classrooms will use one area for small group instruction part of the day but at one time during the day, the same area will be used for snack. At all times this should be clearly indicated for the students such that they do not have to ask, nor be told.

In a study attempting to replicate the results of the EIBI project Smith, Groen, & Wynn (2000) endeavored to correct for the above-described criticisms of Lovaas's research. However, this study did not replicate Lovaas's results as hoped; only 13.3% of children achieved the "best outcomes" of normal IQ and placement in general education settings without special education services (Lovaas reported 47% in this category). They did, however, reveal two findings that are of particular interest to me: some children with ASD make large gains with EIBI, and this tactic may be especially beneficial for children with Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDD NOS). This was the only study that I read that began to identify which children could most benefit from EIBI, though the research is not at all conclusive on this subject.

The room should welcome students and convey the message that it is safe and ready for their learning to take place. Having to tell students repeatedly that they shouldn't be in an area or they shouldn't touch something is a red flag that the room is not student-centered enough. Adjust so this communication can be minimized and the students can work more independently.

The second element of structure is scheduling. This is a terribly important part of the programming aspects of structured teaching. Each student should have a daily schedule that is individualized to his/her communication system and broken into the appropriate blocks of time for each person's needs. As you will see, this is a major component to the success of the choreography as well. Some students need to monitor parts of their schedule rather than the entire thing at once, while others have skills to support their independence with their schedule for complete days. Nevertheless, for the best choreography individual schedules should be complete prior to whole group planning so that programming

remains individualized.

Finally, the last component of structure that creates the foundation for classrooms operating under this philosophy is teaching methods. These should be based again on the individual needs of students to most effectively target their instruction and provide programming wherein their strengths grow and they develop skills to compensate for their weaknesses or to make them disappear entirely. Once structure is in place in the physical environment and through schedules, then teaching methods that include individual work systems bring the program full-circle to move students steadily toward independence. It is upon this foundation that the specifics of total program choreography are based. Without any one of these components, the plan presented here will be unsuccessful so it is assumed that all three components are in place in the classroom and that the adults are all very familiar and comfortable with supporting students in such an environment. As well, students must know the classroom system and how they move from one activity to another, one area to another and out of and back into the classroom throughout the day. It will behoove everyone if students receive individual instruction and support in each area of the structured classroom so that plans for the entire classroom can be more effective and successful.

With this base established let us look at what causes us to need a plan for choreography. There are several problems that typically emerge in a classroom utilizing structured teaching strategies, but that are not truly coordinated. These problems include increased stress levels for staff and students. Staff find themselves feeling pulled and disorganized because students are moving about regularly. This can lead to feelings of not addressing the individual needs of students and making adequate progress toward their goals. For students, the stress tends to be rooted in the fact that the leaders in the room seem to lack a system and that there isn't organization to the entire program. Students, particularly those with a disability on the continuum, seek the comfort of organization, hence the reason structured systems work so well for these students. Therefore, when students sense that the system isn't organized, they feel elevated stress.

A second problem is really quite common sense in nature and it is that the environment is truly disorganized. Having an entire caseload of students working on individualized programs and goals is tricky and can be difficult to balance. It is actually quite easy for the system to be cumbersome to the point of disorganization and this can lead to more difficulties that result in frustration for all. I have found that often when this becomes the problem, structured teaching is blamed rather than lack of organization and the system is typically abandoned.

Finally, and most importantly, when the proper choreography is not in place, there can too often be found activities for students that are not related to their individualized goals. This happens because students are forced into groupings that do not allow for appropriate and/or individualized instruction. Unfortunately, it can also be that students are asked to do things that in fact only equate to busy work rather than that which really supports their programming. And so, choreography attempts to resolve these issues by maximizing efficiency, organization and productive use of time thus allowing for an appropriate, wide-range curriculum.

This concludes part one of this article. Part two is available in the next newsletter.

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