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The Importance of Data Collection

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With the number of due process hearings on the rise and the continuing push for schools to show accountability for intervention efforts, data collection in the classroom has become an increasingly important issue for teachers and administrators. Consistent and valid data collection is a significant component to any good education program. In addition, it is becoming necessary for teachers to describe the teaching strategies and the activities they are using to teach skills, and to describe the data collection strategies they will use to track the skills. The primary difficulty is balancing the student's intervention and interactions with documenting the intervention efforts and effects. In addition to logistical difficulties with data collection, many teachers and administrators have trouble determining what constitutes documentation and what constitutes data collection.

Data serves multiple purposes within a teaching environment. Teachers take data to document objective measures of progress (or lack of progress for a student or group of students), to assess student abilities, to assess the functions of challenging behavior and develop behavioral support plans, to communicate with parents and other staff members and provide consistency of programming across environments and to make decisions about teaching, placement and programming. Teachers also engage in a number of other documentation processes including present levels of performance on IEPs, home-notes and emails to parents, conference summaries, and IEP goals and objectives. It is important to understand that not all types of documentation constitute data.

In order for data to be useful to teachers, and administrators, it is important that it be interpretable to others, that it be easy to use, easy to train staff to use, provide some level of consistency across classrooms, provide key information for making decisions, and that it not interfere with teaching efforts. Sometimes daily data or event-by-event data is needed, but other

times probe data, data samples, and work samples will suffice.

Key I: Make the data useful

Making your collected data a useful part of the program is the first key and of primary importance. If the data one collects has no other value than as a visual aid for an IEP meeting or for filling in a report card, there really is little sense in taking data at all. Data should be used to shape the child's program, to assess the efficacy of the chosen activities and teaching styles, and to look for trends in the child's behaviors and learning.

Key II: Make the data as painless as possible

The second key is finding a style of data collection and analysis that is comfortable and effective. We certainly do not want to end up spending more time with our data than with our kids. That style will, of course, be as individual as each person working with a child, and with the activity or behavior being documented.

Here are a few hints and ideas on collecting and making use of data:

1. For behaviors that are frequent and countable, one great way to track the number of occurrences is to use small counters. Start the day with a handful of paper clips or other small, light objects (plastic bingo discs might work, as would beans) in your right pocket. Each time you see the target behavior during the day, move a clip from the right pocket to the left. At the end of the day, total up the counters in your left pocket and record.
2. Counters are very handy for tallying behaviors that occur quickly or in a variety of settings where hauling a clipboard around might not work well. I use a counter for a group of 4th graders who I work with after school, and who can, at times, get a bit talkative. I keep track of how many times I have to say, "Quiet, please," or "Let's get back on track," or the like. Ten or fewer at the end of the hour and it's rewards all around.
3. One of the best ways to make data collection easier on you is to not do it at all. Get peer tutors involved in flash card trials or the like. Mark the inside of a manila folder with a plus on one side and a minus on the other. If the child gets the trial right, the card goes on the plus side, wrong, and it goes on the minus side. The peer can then plug pluses or minuses into a data sheet when the session is all over. Eventually, too, some kids can run such drills on themselves.
4. Make time for your data. Take a few minutes at the end of each day to quickly review it. Did the child have trouble with anything specifically today that you might want to rethink for tomorrow (additional prompting, more visual supports, a decreased demand). What seemed to go particularly well and what can we draw from that to make other activities more successful? Take a few minutes at the end of the week to plot your new data points onto graphs (if you find the visual of a graph helpful) and to look for emerging trends, which may drive next week's teaching. Take a few minutes at the end of each month to take a good look at how the program has gone, and where it might be going.
5. Choose to have a beginning and ending time frame for many of your student's goals so that taking data is manageable. For example, when writing your IEP goals be aware of objectives that can be mastered in a shorter period so that upon mastery you can be free of the data collection. Likewise, scatter your objectives throughout the year so that focus and data collection is manageable.
6. **This is most important.** Do not be afraid to zone the staff in your room to be responsible for data taking. Make the sheets or system you use accessible throughout the day.

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