Background:
The Johnson family consists of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson and their 12-year-old son, Ethan, who has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Ethan has difficulty with executive functioning, transitions, and self-regulation, leading to frequent challenging behaviors when learning new tasks. His parents are committed to teaching him meaningful skills at home to foster independence and daily functioning.

Home Environment & Current Challenges:
Ethan struggles with routine changes and frustration tolerance, especially when asked to complete multi-step tasks. His parents are working on teaching him basic self-care skills (e.g., making a simple meal, tying his shoes, organizing his backpack). However, the process is met with resistance, avoidance behaviors, and emotional outbursts when Ethan feels overwhelmed or unsuccessful.

Common Challenges Include:
- **Task Avoidance:** Ethan frequently walks away or refuses to start tasks if they seem difficult.
- **Emotional Outbursts:** When frustrated, Ethan may scream, throw objects, or shut down.
- **Difficulty with Transitions:** Moving from preferred activities (video games) to learning a skill leads to meltdowns.
- **Short Attention Span:** ADHD makes it hard for Ethan to focus on multi-step tasks without getting distracted.
- **Parental Stress:** Mr. and Mrs. Johnson feel overwhelmed and unsure of how to keep Ethan engaged and motivated.

Interventions & Strategies Used by the Parents:
To support Ethan's learning, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson have started implementing high-quality instructional strategies, including:

1. **Explicit Instruction & Visual Supports:**
   o Breaking tasks into small, clear steps using visual schedules.
   o Modeling each step before having Ethan try independently.
2. **Flexible Grouping & Partner Learning:**
   o Using a peer buddy system where Ethan practices skills with his older cousin for motivation.
   o Allowing Ethan to watch and copy family members before attempting a new skill himself.
3. **Active Engagement Strategies:**
   o Incorporating games and incentives (e.g., earning screen time for completing a task).
   o Using choice boards so Ethan has control over which skill he learns first.
4. **Reinforcement & Maintenance Strategies:**
   o Praising small successes to build confidence.
   o Practicing skills in multiple settings (e.g., making a sandwich at home, then at grandma's house).
   o Using self-monitoring checklists to help Ethan track his progress.

Despite these strategies, Ethan's challenging behaviors still arise, especially when learning new or non-preferred tasks. The Johnsons are seeking additional guidance on how to make skill-building more successful at home.

Case Study 2: Supporting a Child with Special Needs in Learning Meaningful Skills at Home

Madison Gribbin

College of Education and Communication, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

EDEX: Introduction to Behavior Management in Special Education

Dr. William Schleicher

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When trying to increase motivation and reduce frustration, the "first-then" approach could be a more effective method for Ethan. This method is a strategy specifically geared toward non-preferred tasks by pairing them with a preferred activity. For example, the Johnson's could say "first organize your backpack, then you can play video games." This approach sets clear expectations and helps reduce resistance to the unwanted activity by showing a predictable award.

According to Understood.org, another accommodation the Johnsons can use is to "give step-by-step instructions and have the student repeat them" (Morin, 2023). This can be applied after using the "first-then" approach. For instance, after telling Ethan the expectation of packing his backpack before playing video games, they can walk him through a step-by-step order his backpack should be packed while he packs it. It may be easier for Ethan to have a strict structure to follow when he does this. Instead of putting the materials in random order each time, they can structure it so that the procedure is exactly the same each time he does it. For example, first: math textbook, second: green notebook, third: blue notebook, last: pencil case.

The Johnsons can also teach calm-down strategies to Ethan to help with his frustration. The key to this method is to practice this before an outburst. Some self-regulation methods include deep breathing exercises, squeezing a stress ball, or taking a break in a cozy spot. The deep breathing exercises can be done together to strengthen connection and make it a team effort rather than something Ethan feels forced to do alone. The stress ball can help alleviate built up tension by redirecting frustration into a controlled action. Taking a break in a cozy spot allows Ethan to take a break from an overwhelming situation, which he can go back to after a short break.

When teaching new skills, it's important to understand which methods are most effective for children with disabilities. Since the Johnsons are struggling to find more effective methods of teaching, task analysis is a critical technique to acknowledge. According to Chapter 6 of the textbook, "By task-analyzing complex behaviors, teachers can then use chaining to teach complex tasks or can identify where students are having difficulty with a skill" (Scheuermann, 2022, p. 163).

When performing a task analysis, the Johnsons will choose a task, tying shoes for example, and break the steps down into its simplest components. The textbook demonstrates this as follows: pick up ends of laces, cross one lace over the other, pick up laces where they touch, grasp the end of the top lace, insert it through the opening and release, etc. (Scheuermann, 2022, p. 163). The importance of breaking the task down and analyzing it is so that they can mark the steps where Ethan started to get frustrated. From there, the Johnsons can take extra care to modify those steps or take extra time on them.

Positive reinforcement can keep Ethan's motivation high during the learning process. To increase this, the Johnsons can try using a mix of tangible and social reinforcers. Stickers can be given as a tangible reinforcer. The Johnsons could even create a sticker chart in which Ethan can earn a small prize, like a toy or extra screen time, every 10 stickers he achieves. When given social reinforcers, it's important the Johnsons praise him on a specific task to reinforce the desired behavior. For example, "great job packing your backpack!"

To ensure maintenance and generalization of a newly required skill, the Johnsons can help Ethan see real benefits from his actions. For instance, "Now that you packed your bookbag, you won't forget anything for school." Also, shifting reinforcement schedules will help maintain these skills. Starting off with continuous reinforcement will be highly effective when teaching Ethan a new skill. The Johnsons can reward him with some of the social, activity, or tangible motivators listed above. After a period of time, they can switch to an intermittent reinforcement schedule. One way they could do this is by giving Ethan a sticker every 3 times he organizes his backpack. This will provide a more spaced out and maintainable pattern while still providing Ethan with a predictable structure that he needs.

References

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