Self-Management Systems for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Self-Management is a highly effective yet significantly underutilized evidence-based practice. It is one of only two of the 24 evidence-based practices (EBP) identified by the National Professional Development Center (NPDC) that crosses every domain and age level. In his article, “Don’t forget about Self-Management,” Steve Buckmann states, “By learning self-management techniques, individuals can become more self-directed and less dependent on continuous supervision. Instead of teaching situation specific behaviors, self-management teaches a general skill that can be used in an unlimited number of environments.”

How can an evidence-based practice with this much promise be so underutilized when educating students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? Most likely it is due to a lack of understanding of self-management, a belief that self-management can only be used with older students, or concern that it is too complex for some students. In this brief article, we will provide an example of an application with a student that can be easy to develop and implement. For more information about self-management, go to the NPDC site and look for self-management.

There are five basic components to a self-management plan:
Step 1. Operationally define the target behavior
Step 2. Identify functional reinforcers
Step 3. Design or choose a self-management system
Step 4. Teach the individual to use the self-management device
Step 5. Teach self-management independence

Below is an example of a self-management plan created for a student with ASD. Terry is a 5th grade student who spends 95% of his day in the general education classroom. Terry’s teacher complains that he continuously interrupts while she is trying to teach the class. What are some questions the team must ask to develop a self-management system for interrupting the lecture of the general education teacher?

Step 1. Operationally define the target behavior
What is the target student doing that is interrupting instruction or disruptive compared to peers? Collect data to identify the frequency and duration of the disruption, and the purpose or function of the disruption (e.g. get information, talk about preferred interest, he doesn’t understand the content, gain attention).
Problem: Terry verbally interrupts the teacher an average of 8 times per hour in order to access teacher attention and talk about Disney movies.

Operational definition of replacement behavior: Terry will raise his hand to get the teacher’s attention during class lectures and wait to be called upon by the teacher before responding.

Step 2. Identify functional reinforcers
What are the student’s interest areas? This will assist in the development of the system to promote engagement. If the student is interested in Disney movies, then the system can incorporate this interest and reinforcement can be delivered contingent on following the self-management system. This can include being taught WHERE and WHEN he can access the reinforcer (i.e. talking about Disney movies).

Step 3. Design or choose a self-management system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terry's Academic Schedule</th>
<th>Date: __________________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Class Intervals (5 min)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special (music, art,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish, gym)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments: _______________________________________________________

Terry’s Self-Management System allows for three HRQ’s (Hand Raising Questions) per class activity. His interest in Disney was integrated into the chart in the form of “Mickey hands.” The team is trying to limit not extinguish the number of times Terry can participate in the class instruction, and he is taught an appropriate replacement behavior for interacting in class.
When Terry has a question or comment about what is being presented to the class, he can raise his hand, wait to be called on, respond, and then cross off one HRQ. When Terry has raised his hand and been called upon 3 times during one class activity, he will not be allowed to comment/question again until the next class activity, at which time he will be given three more HRQ’s. The HRQ’s give Terry information about how many times he may question/comment during a class activity.

Terry also struggled with understanding the amount of time each class lecture required so he used a timer and a class interval schedule to monitor how much time was left for the class lecture. This is represented by the middle boxes on the chart. This helped him keep track so he didn’t use up all of his HRQ’s in the first 5 minutes. The vibrating timer was set for 5 minute intervals, and Terry would cross off one box on the class interval schedule each 5 minutes. If needed, the interval boxes could be shaded to represent the amount of time each class activity would last (e.g. 20 minutes of reading lecture, 15 minutes or social studies lecture) since these may vary by day.

**Step 4. Teach the individual to use the self-management system**

The team needs to teach the Self-Management System to Terry through explanation, modeling, and prompting as needed, including:

1. He will have 3 times to question/comment when the teacher is providing instruction to the class.
2. Since he likes to question/comment at the beginning of the class activity, the team will explain to Terry how to use the class interval schedule. The class interval schedule requires a timer. After 5 minutes Terry will put an X in the first box, after 10 minutes Terry will put an X in the second box, etc. The interval schedule will assist Terry in spacing out his 3 HRQ’s.
3. The team will explain to Terry that the LINK student (peer support) assigned to him during each class activity will remind him to use the interval schedule and to mark off the HRQ as he uses them.

**Step 5. Teach self-management independence**

Terry will need to practice to become independent with the schedule. After the first week, team members will observe class activities and take data to determine Terry’s independence in using the Self-Management System. The teacher and the LINK student will be taught to fade prompting in order to reduce the frequency and intensity of reminders provided.