

Engagement and Motivation – The Keys to Early Learning

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Many studies have shown that early learning experiences are pivotal in shaping a child's attitude, motivation, and success in school. With Autism Spectrum Disorders, children can have varying degrees of resistance in the learning environment. There may be difficulties with specific skills, language, comprehension, motivation, and engagement which can all become barriers to successful early learning.

In the September issue of the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders two well known autism experts Lynn and Robert Koegel from the University of California take on the topic of academic motivation in children with ASD. (Improving Motivation for Academics in Children With Autism, JADD, Vol. 40, p 1057-1066). Although theirs was a very small pilot study, it's importance was in reminding me that sometimes we can overlook the obvious when it comes to helping our kids with ASD. For example, just highlighting the concept of motivation in learning is valuable, and can inspire us to find some easy to apply and reasonable strategies we can all use. Frequently in my office I am counseling families about accommodations and modifications to keep children with Autism engaged in the learning process at school. At times we can become so fixated on the IEP and what it includes that we forget about simple and fundamental strategies we can implement at home and at school to improve engagement with academics.

The early school years provide a powerful opportunity to begin children on a path toward learning that is positive and meaningful. Many children with autism struggle with showing little interest or motivation in academic assignments and can exhibit disruptive behaviors when these assignments are presented. Teachers and autism teams often work very hard to develop behavior plans that include incentives and rewards to improve compliance and engagement with the learning process. However, sometimes we just need to take a step back and ask, is my child motivated to learn this or complete this assignment? If not, why and how can we improve the situation?

One key concept that other studies have also explored is giving the child a tangible motivation to complete the activity. Obviously we all use rewards as incentives and this is not new. But what about offering the child certain choices with regard to different aspects of the activity, and provide a clear immediate reward when completed. For example this could be as simple as in a writing exercise offering a choice of writing implement (pencil, marker, crayon, different grips, attractive colors, etc.), choice of paper, where to complete it, and *then get down to work*. Provide clear expectations for the assignment, make it as relevant to that child and his or her interests as possible, followed by a tangible meaningful reward. There is nothing new here I know. It actually seems all too reasonable and quite simple especially to those with years of experience with ABA and behavioral therapy; however, what I am trying to highlight is to think about ***MOTIVATION as a more tangible goal than just compliance.***

Quite often we fixate on the disruptive behaviors and the power struggles with children with ASD to get them to comply in the academic setting. There may be times what we need to do is offer choices to promote ENGAGEMENT. If we think about the big picture and what we are really trying to do with our children, students, and patients who have ASD it is not just to become obedient, **but to ENGAGE and be MOTIVATED to engage** in school, in play, in relationships, and with the world.

Going back to the study cited above, although it was quite small, the positive effect size was quite large. Meaning what they did worked exceedingly well for the small group of children with whom they tried the intervention. During the study the team found the children began to complete school work more quickly, disruptive behaviors diminished, and children even began requesting assignments.

Many times at school and at home we combat resistance and disruption because we cannot get the child with ASD to ENGAGE or be MOTIVATED to see or do what we want them to be doing. By reminding ourselves that engagement and motivation are precursors to being compliant we may find our own novel and unique ways to get our kids to join us in an activity. By setting this stage early we help promote a positive experience in the school environment which is pivotal for learning. We can also set our children up for success in relationships.

Below are some books where you can find more information about Autism and engagement.

Teaching Social Communication to Children with Autism: A Practitioner's Guide to Parent Training by Ingersoll and Dvortsak

Children with Autism: Promoting Language, Learning and Engagement by Sally Rogers