



Anticipate, Plan, Prepare: Behavioral Supports for FXS

During several recent school consultations it became apparent to me that we still struggle to provide a learning environment for students with fragile X syndrome (FXS) that supports their best behavioral outcomes. A number of issues continue to hinder our quest to improve students' classroom behavior.

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easy to target behaviors that are dangerous and interfere with learning, they are difficult to treat because the cause is less obvious.

One of the most frequent mistakes is to prematurely eliminate supports when the student demonstrates, in isolation or under controlled learning, a level of competence that seems to render supports unnecessary. During my recent observations, I compiled a list of supports that are important to consider when aggressive behavior escalates in the classroom.

VISUAL SCHEDULE

Given that a simple change in schedule can be the catalyst for behavioral outbursts, establishing a predictable schedule seems obvious, but is often overlooked. Depending on the level of their affectedness, some students with FXS cannot tolerate any change, so they need a variety of supports to prepare for it. One such support is a written schedule that can provide a

In most cases, the focus on behavior in the classroom relates to aggression toward an object or another person. Aggression in this case is defined as pinching, grabbing, pushing, hitting and kicking. Because these behaviors are aberrant, they are more frequently identified, counted and analyzed than other more benign behaviors. While it is

snapshot of the day's overall structure. A written schedule is ideal for someone with FXS because it utilizes many of the processing strengths we see in this population. Visual icons provide a conceptual gestalt of the day and an understanding of how events will unfold. Sometimes, after a student begins to habituate to a daily schedule, the visual support is eliminated because the team believes it will benefit the student's progress toward independence.

It is important to realize, however, that the day's schedule is critical scaffolding that supports a positive behavioral outcome. The schedule is a tool to reduce anxiety, created by a fear of not knowing what lies ahead. It allows the student to self-regulate break times and much-needed sensory input. We all rely on some form of to-do list, day timer or palm pilot, even though we may know our schedule. It is reassuring nevertheless to have what is expected of us written down somewhere, and to know if the expectation will change.

ACADEMIC CHALLENGE

Given the cognitive challenges that students with FXS face, academic achievement is difficult for them. They learn best with high-interest materials. Many of these students are included with neurotypical peers throughout the day and are exposed to age-appropriate interests and behaviors. They are great imitators and notice how other students behave. The literature is full of anecdotal examples of learning styles and successful learning strategies gained from this exposure.

The student with FXS may feel embarrassed and engage in disruptive behaviors when a task is presented that is uninteresting or below the norm. For example, if the task for neurotypical peers is writing about the science lab and the student with FXS is given a puzzle of Winnie the Pooh, the dramatic difference in the caliber of the task can create conflict in the student with FXS. Unfortunately, this is more typical than one would imagine.

On the other hand, if the task is too difficult and the student is simply placed with his neurotypical peers to “absorb without support,” it may be equally as embarrassing. The student may exhibit behavior that is a reaction to feelings of failure and embarrassment.

Sometimes even with support the content is so difficult that the student cannot understand the information and is frustrated that the expectation of using the support does not pay off. For example, having the social science textbook read to the student using “Kurzweil” (computer software that reads the student’s text) may not hold his or her interest because the content is too difficult to understand without adaptations.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

There are a number of ways to include students with FXS in a social environment with their neurotypical peers as well as school staff. Including the student with FXS in school-related activities such as drama, music and sports provides venues where social skills can be practiced. Contact with neurotypical peers provides good opportunities to foster friendships outside an academic environment. Encouraging tasks that can be accomplished within the school community provides a sense of belonging and reinforces that wonderful trait of cooperation. Having a job with specific responsibilities can elevate self-esteem and confidence. Many jobs such as library aide, cafeteria worker, memo delivery, attendance courier, or teacher aide have proven to be successful and rewarding to students with FXS.

SCHEDULED BREAKS

Interspersing tasks throughout the school day provides opportunities to vary sensory input. Many students with FXS require prescribed sensory breaks during the day. These breaks can be as vital as any required course. Planning sensory breaks can be challenging, so it is critical to include an occupational therapist with specific sensory training integration in developing a schedule that provides appropriate intervention. Waiting until students with FXS are overwhelmed by a task before providing a break becomes a reactive measure and usually fails because the behavior has already begun to escalate.

The student with FXS may also experience low muscle tone, which makes it difficult to stand or sit for long periods. Opportunities within the schedule to increase physical endurance can be a proactive strategy to remedy discomfort created by periods of physical activity later in the day.

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Responding to a student who refuses to walk, sit or stand can be challenging. What often follows is a mix of lying down, dragging feet or falling onto the floor. This can be difficult to remedy because the student may be bigger than the instructor. It also

poses ethical dilemmas regarding physical management. Establishing a proactive strategy is a more effective way to reduce the likelihood of physically managing the behavior.

TOKEN SYSTEMS

The student with FXS often needs reassurance or encouragement to meet the demands of increased length or complexity of tasks. The use of a token board or some type of token system allows the student to understand expectations in a very concrete way. The token system is flexible and can be used to meet individual differences based on concentration and overall ability.

Often the length of a task becomes so overwhelming that the student engages in behavior that promotes escape or task avoidance. Anxiety contributes to the behavioral cycle, and often results in behavior escalation because the task length and expectation has not been communicated to the student. The token board is a proactive measure that provides necessary support to reduce anxiety and communicate task expectation in a systematic and non-threatening way.

Another benefit of the token system is it provides an opportunity to delay reinforcement. Typically when a new task is being taught, reinforcement is delivered immediately, sometimes even if the student attempts a response. Later, after the task becomes more complex or lengthy, it is not always appropriate to reinforce every trial or portion of the task. Building a work ethic and stamina requires less frequent reinforcement, which in turn increases the expectation before reinforcement is delivered.

The token system can be used at school, in the community and during work tasks of any nature. It is an easy strategy to implement and can be portable and available in any venue. Building task tolerance, length of engagement and work stamina are all skills that can be acquired using this system.

continued on page 28 →