

EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

for Children with Autism



Programs that support reading, behavior management and scheduling

By Lynda Dell

Many children with autism struggle with learning to read, managing behavior and establishing routines and schedules. Interventions designed to reduce these challenges can result in major accomplishments.

Interventions were life transforming for one 16-year-old student who couldn't read. Six months into the Wilson Reading program at ATG Academy of Warminster, PA, he went out to dinner and could read the menu for the first time in his life.

"It is very empowering for our teachers when our students are not just picking apart words but are reading sentences," says Kathleen Smookler, head of the academy.

Reading interventions

The three most popular reading intervention programs for children with autism are self-paced systems that track a student's progress and have comprehension, writing and spelling components. Small reading classes enable teachers to address each child's specific needs.

The Wilson Reading System, designed for dyslexic students but very effective for children with other reading issues, focuses on segmenting words into individual letters and corresponding sounds, then blending them together to sound out words, says Smookler. Students begin with basic spelling and syllabication rules and progress to mastery of multi-syllabic words.

The multi-sensory Orton-Gillingham method uses repetition to teach students how to read, spell, write and comprehend. Students retain more information when they use all of their senses, says K-12 reading teacher Barbara Fedeli from Hampton Academy of Mt. Holly,

NJ. She modifies the programs' hands-on activities and strategies for each student and grade level, providing individual or small-group instruction in the academy's resource room.

"Students retain more information when they use all of their senses"

-Barbara Fedeli

Read 180, a comprehensive system of curriculum and assessment from Scholastic, uses a combination of laptop and whole-group instruction to develop language and communication skills in struggling readers, explains Jennifer Cullen, a special education teacher from Valley Day School in Morrisville, PA.

Behavioral support

Positive behavior plans support students and also change behaviors. Both The Vanguard School, of Malvern, PA, and The High Road School of Delaware in Wilmington have implemented a school-wide program for K-12 modeled after Positive Behavior Intervention Support programs. These programs are rooted in core values and are incentive-driven and achievable.

The Vanguard School emphasizes respect, responsibility, readiness and safety, explains Annette Brandolini, assistant clinical director at the school. Students earn points that convert to "value dollars" to purchase games or toys when they achieve their goals.

The High Road School students also earn benefits when they work hard in the classroom and maintain positive behaviors with peers and staff, explains

the school's director of education, Ian Cassidy. In February, 15 of their students earned a tour of Lincoln Financial Field, where the Philadelphia Eagles play football.

Structured teaching

The TIM Academy in Berwyn, PA, has learned many of their strategies from the TEACCH Approach, which focuses on the learning characteristics of students with autism, the structure of their environment and the use of visual supports to teach concepts.

"Students with autism are characteristically bound by routines. We know that establishing functional routines reduces anxiety, makes the world more predictable and, in turn, creates more independence," says Wendy Moran, executive director of the academy.

Moran notes that work systems let students know the work they are to do, the order in which to do it and the reinforcer they will get after it is done. Students earn rewards for accomplishing goals, and they learn that work comes before play.

With nurturing, proper guidance and instruction, all kids can blossom. When school environments reduce stress, keep students on task and provide academic, social and emotional support, students truly flourish. mk

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