Behavior Interventions for Students with ADHD

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Kella, a third grade student, enters her class in the morning. Immediately, she sees a few of her classmates and wants to tell them about her new shoes. She drops her coat and backpack at the door, forgetting to follow the morning routine, and rushes over to talk to them. She's acting so excited that her classmates ignore her. Kella's teacher then reminds her that her stuff is still on the floor and that she needs to do her morning routine. She quickly stuffs her cubby and gets ready for the day. During instruction, Kella gets up to sharpen her pencils and starts talking out about how they always break. Her teacher tells her to sit down and that it's not the right time to sharpen pencils. Kella is energetic and loves coming to school, but it is hard for her to focus because she struggles to control her energy and attention. This is because Kella is a student who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Symptoms of ADHD include "... a variety of difficulties in school settings, including problems with behavior control, academic achievement, and peer relationships" (DuPaul & Weyandt, 2006, pg. 161). Traits such as self-management and attention are often a struggle for people with ADHD. These traits affect multiple areas of functioning.

It is evident that the diagnosis and treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has significantly increased over the past 10 years (Goldstein & Naglieri, 2008). The question is, how do educators successfully teach students who show symptoms of ADHD and help them to become academically successful long-term?

It is important for primary elementary teachers to intervene early and to know strategies and interventions that are most beneficial for students who have ADHD. Findings suggest that behavioral and academic interventions, in addition to working closely with families and medical personnel, are the most effective in helping students with ADHD be successful in all areas of functioning (DuPaul & Weyandt, 2006). Behavior interventions include using antecedent and consequence-based strategies, teaching organization skills, and teaching self-management skills. Primary teachers need to be aware of the growing diagnosis of ADHD and the interventions that they can use to support students in their learning (DuPaul & Weyandt, 2006; Goldstein & Naglieri, 2008). Not every student is going to benefit from the same interventions, so having a variety of resources can help primary teachers assess and provide individual students with the support they need.

Antecedent-based strategies are interventions that come before the behavior happens, and aim to prevent the behavior from happening. Providing students with options and allowing them to make choices are antecedent strategies that reduce unwanted behavior (DuPaul & Weyandt, 2006). For example, allowing a student to choose which assignment he/she wants to do at the time in an antecedent based strategy. Another example is displaying and clearly teaching behavior expectations before an assignment or class session. Telling students to raise their hands before asking a question...
prevents the unwanted behavior of shouting out answers. Making sure students know they need to work quietly and independently during an assignment may prevent students from discussing or talking to peers around them. A third possible strategy is modifying tasks and assignments. This is helpful because "[s]tudents with ADHD sometimes engage in off-task disruptive behaviors to avoid or escape tasks, such as written assignments (DuPaul & Weyandt, 2006, pg. 163). Ways to accommodate tasks could be to provide a scaffold; for example, a writing template to help students organize their papers. Examples of an adaptation are to shorten the amount of work that a task requires, split the work up into sections, or provide a checklist so that students can check off a task once they have completed a portion of it.

Consequence-based strategies are similar, but they are used after the behavior to increase or decrease it. A few examples include point systems, verbal reinforcements, and 'time-outs'. Point systems are when points are given to students if they are showing appropriate behaviors. Points can also be given to the teacher, or not given at all, if the students are showing inappropriate behaviors. Tokens or stickers could also be used in place of points. After students earn a certain number of points, then a more valuable reward can be given. This could be a few minutes added to recess time, no homework over the weekend, a prize from a surprise box, etc. However, it is important to not assume something will be a reinforcer for all students, because individuals respond to awards differently (Goldstein & Naglieri, 2008). For example, one student may like public, verbal praise, while another student might get embarrassed from public praise. Gathering information through assessment about each child and what they find reinforcing will be helpful. The second suggested strategy is verbal reinforcement, which includes acknowledging appropriate behavior (AAB) and giving specific praise. For example, telling a student, "great job, you made it to your seat with out talking," pinpoints the behavior and the students know exactly what they did well. Lastly, time-outs could be implemented in the classroom, without the label "time-out." Time outs can be effective when a student is misbehaving and he/she needs time to sit away from the class to calm down. It is important to remember that every child is reinforced differently. According to Dupaul, Weyandt and Janusis (2011), "... the efficacy of time-out is solely dependent on whether the classroom [or activity] is viewed as a positive environment by the student; otherwise time-out can actually reinforce (or increase the probability of) problematic behaviors" (pg. 37). Some students may act out because they know they will be sent away or out of the classroom, which could be a reward for them.

Teaching organizational strategies, another form of a behavioral intervention, helps students with planning and attention challenges. Time-management and planning for long-term tasks are often difficult for students with ADHD (Langberg & Epstein, 2008). According to Goldstein and Naglieri (2008), "A series of research studies has been conducted which indicates that children who are poor in planning can be taught to be better at planning when they complete academic tasks and that facilitating the strategic completion of classroom work positively impacts academic performance" (pg. 870). One study looked at an 8-week organization intervention for children with ADHD (Langberg, Epstein, 2008). In this intervention, students ranging from grades 4-7 were given group and one-on-one counseling to assist them in organization and
planning strategies. They made checklists for the organization of their backpacks, binders and lockers. They also were supposed to get their planners initialed by their teachers everyday, after they write in their homework assignments. Counselors used a homework-tracking sheet to record if this was being done. The study also included behavioral award systems and parent involvement. Assessments and evaluations were done over the 8-week period to track the students' progress. Data showed that there was a positive impact on students' academic scores because of the organization intervention. Researchers did a follow-up evaluation after an 8-week period to see if the improvements were consistent. Findings showed that, "In addition to improvement in parent ratings of homework problems, the intervention resulted in gains in class grades" (Langberg, Epstein, 2008, pg. 415). This suggests organizational interventions are effective in improving academic success; however, more widespread and long-term research on organization interventions would be helpful in knowing the complete effects of these interventions (Langberg & Epstein, 2008).

Lastly, self-management is a behavioral intervention that "... encourage[s] students with ADHD to monitor, evaluate, and/or reinforce their own behaviors, often in conjunction with or following the successful application of teacher-mediated behavioral approaches" (DuPaul, Weyandt & Janusis, 2011, pp. 37-38). This intervention is a successful way to help students be on-task, organized, and self-disciplined (Goldstein & Naglieri, 2008). Students can be given evaluation sheets on regular intervals that have them choose a number on a scale to score how well they followed expectations. Then they will compare their scores to the teacher's and the teacher has the opportunity to evaluate and tell the student why they scored the way they did. Eventually, the teacher ratings can be reduced according to how well the student's rates match the teachers (DuPaul, Weyandt & Janusis, 2011, pp. 37-38). Another way students can self-monitor is to reinforce their own behaviors by using points or prizes. Having teachers mediate and slowly reduce their mediation can be used for this as well. Self-monitoring and self-reinforcement are effective in improving various difficulties that students with ADHD have.

Primary education teachers have an active role to play in providing interventions for students with ADHD. Intervening early is crucial because it will help prevent future problems from occurring. According to DuPaul and Weyandt (2006), "Children with ADHD are at high risk for problematic school outcomes including grade retention, placement in special education, dropping out of high school, and lower than expected rates of post-secondary education" (pg. 162). Effective interventions that help prevent risky outcomes include antecedent and consequence based strategies, teaching students how to be organized and teaching them how to use self-management skills.
Some examples include reinforcement, AAB, accommodating tasks, organizational checklists, and self-management assessments. Teaching students how to self-monitor and giving them strategies will benefit them long-term and across multiple domains. The strategies proposed are also beneficial for all children. Some students will need more explicit instruction in certain areas; however, implementing the discussed interventions in the classroom won't hinder any students, but will surely increase their success as well. Teachers, parents, professionals and school teams all collaborating together is most effective to help students be successful and thrive in all areas of functioning.
References:


