Teachers' Corner

Recommended Practices for Students with Extensive Support Needs During Online Learning

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The switch to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic presented special educators with many challenges in how to best serve students with extensive support needs (ESN) without being able to provide face-to-face, individualized instruction. As most students have returned to the classroom, we can now reflect on the lessons learned and be better prepared for situations which might call for alternative methods of instruction (AMI).

In the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Arkansas chapter of DADD (AR-DADD) sent out a survey to special educators and stakeholders inquiring about what needs they had in supporting students during synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Eighty educators, para-educators, and caregivers responded with a wide variety of requests for supports ranging across grades K-12 and including diagnoses in multiple IDEA disability categories. While many responses were specific to academic targets, nearly half included requests for resources in targeting social skills, adaptive and life skills, and interfering behavior. Because online learning for students with ESN will often require a caregiver or other adult to be physically present, the following strategies and resources are aimed to support both teachers and caregivers.

Creating Opportunities for Social Engagement and Increasing Social Skills

Communicating and engaging with peers is an essential component of inclusive education and leads to improved outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Kuntz & Car-

ter, 2019). However, creating space online for peer interaction can be challenging when remote learning is heavily focused on independent, individual activities. The AR-DADD survey requests for social skills supports were centered around increasing engagement with peers and being able to identify and respond with appropriate social behavior. One strategy to increase online engagement between the individual with ESN and their peers is to embed a social task into the same activity each day. This could be a morning partner check in with a social question prompt, a think-pair-share activity after completing a specific subject assignment, or in the case of an asynchronous lesson, a small group activity using an audio or video application such as Jamboard or Screencastify. Biggs & Carter (2022) introduce briefs for nine peer engagement interventions and a decision tree to aide in selecting the best option for individual students. Students may need direct instruction to identify and respond with appropriate social initiations and responses while interacting with peers. Recommended practices for facilitating peer engagement and instruction of social skills include use of focused practices such as modeling, prompting, positive reinforcement, visual supports, video modeling, and scripting through structured supports provided by peer training and social skills groups (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013). For more online social skills resources: https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/doc/resources/social-skills-resources-for-online-learning.pdf

Targetting Life and Adaptive Skills in the Home Setting

The benefit of students completing online learning from home is that the adaptive or life skills they would typically be learning in a contrived school situation are now taught in the natural environment. This increases the likelihood of generalization and maintenance of the skill aspects of instruction critical for students with developmental disabilities (Ruppar et al., 2023). However, this setting change also requires higher levels of caregiver involvement to execute strategies like modeling, physical prompting, or environmental arrangement that may be needed in targeting complex skills. The AR-DADD survey requests categorized as life and adaptive skills supports could be divided between home-based routines (i.e., getting dressed) and community related activities (i.e., paying at a store). Recommended practices for teaching life and adaptive skills can be modified to apply to the online learning setting. For example, task analyses can be provided to guide caregivers in breaking down a complex task and supporting their child in mastering individual steps. Visuals or video modeling can be provided for the student to have access to prompts or instruction without the teacher or caregiver needing to be engaged in the task. Likewise, video models and visuals can be created for caregivers to support their assistance in teaching skills needed in daily routines and activities. Adaptive and life skills instruction should be embedded in the student's natural routine and involve regular coaching and feedback for the caregiver. Teachers can work with caregivers to identify skills that are most important to the student and the caregiver throughout the day and support caregivers in creating manageable but efficient teaching opportunities. For more resources to support life and adaptive skills during remote learning: https://blog.esc13.net/remote-learning-for-life-skills-students-planning-for-all-learners/

Increasing Expected Behaviors & Behavior Management Strategies

The transition to and from online learning may cause some students to engage in higher rates of challenging behaviors as routines, contexts, and predictability change. Most AR-DADD survey requests for behavioral supports included either increasing on-task behaviors or increasing coping skills to reduce interfering behaviors. If a student has a behavior intervention plan (BIP), it is important to first assess the current plan with the caregiver to align or modify strategies to better meet the needs of the student in the home context (Stenhoff et al., 2020). If the student does not have a BIP but requires behavior support, it is also critical to involve caregivers in assessing and selecting strategies to target expected behaviors. Once you have determined the in-home behavioral needs of the student, it is important to provide caregiver training and supports. Brief caregiver trainings should follow evidence-based practices including instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback (Stenhoff et al., 2020), which can be modified for online instruction using virtual presentations, video recordings, and video-conferencing applications (Higgins et al., 2017). Physical and virtual aides can be created to support caregivers in implementing behavior-based strategies. For examples of visual supports: https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/resources/visual-supports/index.html

Conclusion

Whether we ever go back to extended periods of online learning or just have the occasional AMI snow day, it is important for teachers to feel confident and prepared to work alongside caregivers to provide the most effective supports to meet each students' needs, both in and out of academic settings. Teachers across Arkansas identified areas of concern in their ability to support students in these contexts. The strategies described address these concerns.

References

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