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Perceptions, Perseverance, and Practical Answers

The teacher's perspective

We thought we could improve Pace's work-schedule board by putting in some "break" cards at intervals within the task-card line. This meant he could choose a sensory activity — like jumping on the mini trampoline, getting in the ball bag or swinging on the OT swing — whenever he got to a "break." He loved these choices, and they helped to keep him calm.

In those days even a short burst of work was exhausting for Pace and might involve many moments of tantrums and noncompliance on his part and redirection or cajoling on our part. If he knew a reward was coming, we usually got more out of him. A big early breakthrough happened one day as Pace was resisting a group activity and starting to tantrum. He suddenly rushed over to his schedule, got a "break" card, and gave it to his aide. This was one of his first real communications toward us, and it made us very happy.

The parents' view

It was so hard to know what he was thinking and how hard we could push him. Everyone was dying to know how to reach Pace and make him part of the group. I spent a lot of time working with all the other children in the room so I could get some kind of idea of what "normal" was. It was staggering how different the kids all were! I was stunned again and again to witness what I considered to be a totally successful five or six-year-old struggle mightily with something that came easily to my own child; like counting in numerical order, reciting the alphabet, reading. Of course, most of the children were way ahead of him in the more abstract ideas like today, tomorrow, and yesterday.

I thought, surely they were more advanced socially. But I watched children develop phobias about the lunchroom, get their feelings hurt over not being chosen to do something like erase the blackboard, suffer intense embarrassment if they gave a "wrong" answer. I saw kids jockey for position, demand attention, make bad choices, lie, be mean, act lazy, and try to get out of doing work.

Then I looked at Pace — quiet, studious, unconcerned Pace. He never vied for the limelight. That was a deficit. His disorder made him completely uninterested in shared attention. He liked to learn at the computer with headphones on. He liked to eat quietly and read books by himself and was totally happy to spend

the entire recess sifting mulch through his fingers, swinging alone, or walking the perimeter. How long would it be before the children tired of his lack of play skills and limited repertoire of responses? When might they give up and move on to a more satisfying project? It just seemed like Pace would always be the odd man out.

The teacher's perspective

I'll never forget the day that we had a lunchtime birthday party for a child, and the child's mother brought chicken nuggets for all the children to eat as a special treat before the cake. Pace had never wanted to participate in birthday celebrations before. They were often too chaotic, and he was always clearly disturbed by the noise and break in routine. He never ate donuts or treats or anything that other parents brought to give to the kids.

So as the chicken nuggets were served, a group of us stood to the side and discussed who would go with Pace to the regular lunch room so he could get something to eat in a more regular setting. One of us volunteered to go with him and the rest turned back to the party in progress. Lo and behold, there was Pace, calmly sitting in the middle of all the other children, completely at ease, wolfing down chicken nuggets as fast as anyone.

There was no question that Pace could be part of that group. He did belong. He was just like everyone else, only more so! By the end of the year, Pace was adhering to my rules, earning Skittles for good behavior, and responding to my famous "look" that I give every child to get them to do the right thing.

He could read. He was starting to be able to write. He knew his letters and numbers. Most of our Work Jobs were a breeze for him. I feel quite sure that when he graduated from kindergarten, he knew basically the same as or more than any child in the room.

What the other children felt

I liked Pace. He's a really good guy! He talked by the way he acts. Each time he was kicking we knew by the way he was acting that he was scared or mad and when he was acting ok we knew that he was alright and that he was having a good time right then.



Jack R.

I liked him when I first met him.

Ray B.

When I got to know him, it turned out pretty good. I spent a lot of time with him in the classroom and I got to like him. He really surprised me how he didn't whine and he didn't feel sorry for himself, and that's what I liked about him.

Morgan T.

One time he said, "Hello," and he almost said my name.

Manny R.

Pace goes like this (drums lips with fingers) when he's happy, and I like that.

Ray B.

Whenever he hurt me or hurt one of my friends, I thought that he was kinda mean, but my Mom told me he had this disease and then I thought "Poop! I totally messed up!"

Jack R.

When he kicked my leg he made me angry.

Ray B.

He scared me when he hit me.

John T.

And when he kicked me.

Manny R.

But he was frustrated.

John T.



Because he couldn't talk.

Manny R.

I was proud of myself for playing with Pace and hugging him and he really loved to give me a high five. I was proud of myself for stopping worrying and leaving all that stuff behind me and saying "I can do this" and really playing with Pace.

Morgan T.

I was proud of trying to teach Pace how to talk.

Jack R.

When he wanted to make what I was making, I would show him how.

Macy M.

What the other children's parents thought

Pace was a master with computer games.

MT

I was impressed with how Pace followed directions from Mrs. Hodge, and he tried so hard.

JH

Pace did a great job trying to communicate with peers and teachers. I realized Pace was frustrated at times when no one seemed to understand his needs.

SM

One of the best things I ever saw Pace do was let other children hold his hand and "hold back." He must be a loving child.

LC

It was so cool when Pace decorated his flower pot for his Mother's Day gift. I could tell that he knew that his Mother would love it and be proud.

DM

His reading! It was great!

MB

I felt awkward. I was afraid to interact with him for fear of upsetting him. When he was upset, he seemed hard to control.

SB

Sometimes my daughter would explain to me that Pace didn't like to talk and that he would sometimes kick her, but she said "That's Okay, Mama, he can't help it."

DM

My daughter came home once and told me that Pace had smiled at her.

HM

My son enjoyed Pace and he commented on how he liked it when he laughed.

MB

I loved seeing Pace sing and participate in the morning songs, etc. I loved seeing Pace smile. What a great smile! I knew Pace understood everything I was saying to him — especially when we made eye contact.

SM

My son gave no indication all year long that there was anything different about Pace. I think in his eyes Pace was just one of the kids in his class and he accepted him.

AS

My dear friend sent my daughter a book on Las Vegas and when she took it to school Pace loved it. He looked at it every chance he got. That made my daughter proud that Pace was interested in something that she had.

DM

I'm amazed and a little sad that as much as I was in and out of that classroom last year, I never had any real one-on-one time with Pace to see any unusual behaviors (either good or bad) that stick out in my mind. I just considered Pace a part of the student body of the kindergarten class and never noticed anything that stood out — one way or the other. My son would occasionally report on an incident when Pace would become agitated and act out physically with kicking, etc., but I never witnessed this. I do remember feeling such joy for Pace at his birthday party on the train while watching him open his presents. Even though his verbal attempts at “thank you” were not always successful, his face showed such joy and appreciation and delight at his gifts — especially the books!

BR



I praise the students, parents and faculty for having such patience and tender hearts toward Pace.

PR

What the school professionals saw

I learned so much from being around Pace. I sincerely appreciated the opportunity to work with him. Some of the lessons I learned from Pace were: never assume anything, always keep an open mind, and behavior is communication.

Speech Therapist

I had to think beyond the academic goals to include behavior strategies to get to the goals.

Occupational Therapist

Once Pace learned the rules or directions he did well until someone broke the routine. He showed me the importance of keeping to routine.

Special Education Case Manager

He required one-on-one and his behavior would scare me.

Teacher's Assistant

I teach social skills and this is almost impossible for a child like Pace.

Guidance Instructor

Sometimes, all I could do was pray.

Teacher's Aide

Pace taught me to increase my patience and tolerance, to make needed changes quickly, to be persistent, and that I'm more stubborn than he is!

Special Education Case Manager

He knows I want him to use words, and I will wait just as long as needed until he does use words.

Teacher's Assistant

I always say "hello" to Pace when I see him in the hallways and he usually does not respond. My best moment was the first time he said "hello" back to me, and used my name.

Physical Education Teacher

I enjoyed the way the other students worked with him and that he brought out the good in the other kids.

Music Teacher

I was deeply moved by the reaction of Pace's schoolmates toward him. They loved him, and I felt both he and they greatly benefited by being together. He was placed in a classroom where he was well received by teacher and students alike.

Speech Therapist

I had many “best moments” when I knew I had reached him and could see how bright he is and how easily he learns new skills.

Special Education Case Manager

My goal has been to work *with* Pace by putting him in social situations and more one-on-one interactions, but I was always careful to be right there with him providing the tools to be successful.

Speech Therapist



Never give up. You may not see progress or feel like you’ve made any. Just take a moment, step back, and take a breath. Now see all the progress. Even the tiniest bit is grand!

Teacher’s Assistant

I think that if an educator ever feels that he or she hasn’t learned something new by experiencing the individual differences of a child, something is very wrong.

Speech Therapist

How do we encourage the least verbal child in the class to find his “voice” and become a fully participating member of the group?

Over the long term, we want this child to talk more, to tolerate more, to socialize more. These are crucial goals covering extensive time periods. To get these goals, we must look for small changes

All learning involves frustration. We want to get it right. As we make gradual progress, moderate amounts of frustration will help motivate us to persist.

Gradually Increase Flexibility and Communication

The title of this chapter, “Finding a Way to Work Beyond Words,” indicates that we are modifying our practices more than we are changing the child. Of course, the primary goal is to teach the child to communicate and to be more flexible. Over the long term, we want this child to talk more, to tolerate more, to socialize more. These are crucial goals covering extensive time periods. To get these goals, we must look for small changes. We must help the child improve only gradually. Change and learning are slow, sequential processes. We must keep in mind the fact that our goals are long-term and that progress will be in a step-by-step fashion.

The Relationship Between Frustration and Learning

As we all do when learning, the child with special needs will experience frustration with our efforts to help him or her learn flexibility and communication skills. All learning involves frustration. We want to get it right. As we make gradual progress, moderate amounts of frustration will help motivate us to persist. Think about learning to read or learning to play a musical instrument. As you start, you will experience frustration with errors, with a lack of perfection. Frustration, in moderation, motivates us to persist.

Although moderate levels of stress can facilitate learning, higher levels of frustration will interfere with learning. This has been proven repeatedly in research on learning and frustration. An absence of frustration does not promote learning. Extreme frustration leads to overload and task abandonment. Moderate frustration leads us to push onward.

As children make progress in learning, they may show moderate amounts of frustration. If frustration is absent, learning is likely to be slower. If the frustra-

tion is extreme, it will interfere with sleep, appetite, mood, and social interactions. However, the presence of increased frustration is not necessarily a bad sign. It is likely to coincide with increased learning.

In the previous segment you read about the teacher's and parent's concern about the child's frustration level. They struggled to try to contain the frustration. It was hard to tell if the progress seen was worth the frustration expressed.

Working with and through Frustration

Watch the child's frustration level closely. Moderate levels of frustration are optimal. Try to support the child, but do not reduce demands for learning. Instead, keep the child involved in preferred activities. Stick to a predictable schedule. Use sensory breaks after periods of learning and frustration. Continue your efforts to nurture the child in ways he or she prefers.

If frustration is extreme and persistent, you may have to reduce learning demands. Because many children with autism take up to two weeks to adjust to a new change, be sure to go at least that long before reducing educational demands. If the high frustration level lasts longer than two weeks, then have a team problem-solving discussion. Look for ways to minimize sensory demands. Try to eliminate one stressful activity at school and one at home. Maximize the child's time with preferred activities. Avoid unnecessary changes during periods of high frustration.

Stick to a predictable schedule. Use sensory breaks after periods of learning and frustration. Continue your efforts to nurture the child in ways he or she prefers.

It is a serious mistake to try to change the child more than the setting. Frustration will increase.