START UP REMINDERS AND GUIDELINES FOR AUTISM SUPPORT CLASSROOMS

As many of you are gearing up to start the school year, or may have already started, we wanted to send some reminders and general considerations. Many teachers have expressed concerns about the potential impact on regression (both in skill sets as well as with challenging behaviors) that may result from the extended time students have had without their typical instructional activities.

Keep in mind that regardless of the type of format you are using for instructional delivery, one must take into consideration and be sensitive to the added stressors that may have an impact on skill acquisition, behavior, and social-emotional well-being. This is also important to consider in relation to staff and families. Unprecedented circumstances call for patience and flexibility with yourselves, your students, and their families as you navigate through doing the best you can.

New Students

For all new students, the first few days back to school should focus on establishing the classroom environment, instructional materials, and staff as a set of improving conditions. You want to maintain this condition with all students, but it is especially critical for students who have no familiarity with the staff or environment. You accomplish this by making sure that being with staff, at the instructional areas, and around instructional materials, always results in things getting better for them. You want to make sure to correlate yourselves and instruction with reinforcement. Here are some guidelines for establishing good instructional control and getting your students to *want to learn and respond to you*:

1. You will need to identify a variety of valuable items and activities that can serve as a potential reinforcer. Remember that reinforcers are things that happen after behavior that make it more likely that behavior will occur again because it results in improving conditions. Make sure you consider reinforcers across a variety of motivational categories. These may include, but are not limited to items/toys, edibles/snacks, drinks, social interactions, other actions or activities, electronics, etc.
2. Any time students engage in approach behavior you want to make sure it results in things getting better…reinforce them! Here are some examples of what to look for:
    - Reaching toward you
    - Staying in your proximity
    - Looking in your direction
    - Orienting their body toward you
    - Asking for items or attention from you
    In other words, you want to correlate staff and all interactions with staff with "good stuff."
3. As soon as students are no longer actively trying to escape you, and instead are showing approach behaviors as described above, start the process of fading in demands and assessment:

- Start by embedding simple, fun demands related to their reinforcers. For example, telling the student to "take" the playdough out of its container or to push a button on their favorite toy, will allow you to provide reinforcement for that response.
- One way to get them to want to respond is to give better reinforcement when they respond to something that you tell them to do vs. just for staying with you. This is what is known as "differential reinforcement." It means you give better reinforcement for better responding. This works because people choose to do the things that result in better reinforcement.
- Once students are consistently responding to easy, in-context demands you can start to slide in assessment demands.
- Fade in your demands in both number and difficulty while still providing reinforcement at high rates.

New Student Assessment:

As soon as you have established approach behavior (having students respond to you in any way as described above), begin assessing the student's skill sets in order to start programming as soon as possible. Depending on age and instructional level, this initial assessment may include:

- Behavioral language assessment (language across functions: manding/requesting, tacting/labeling, echoic, imitation, and intraverbal/conversational skills)
- Other critical skill sets such as imitation, listener responding/following directions, and match to sample
- Social skills
- Activities of daily living/independent skills
- Curricular-based assessments (ELA, math, etc.)
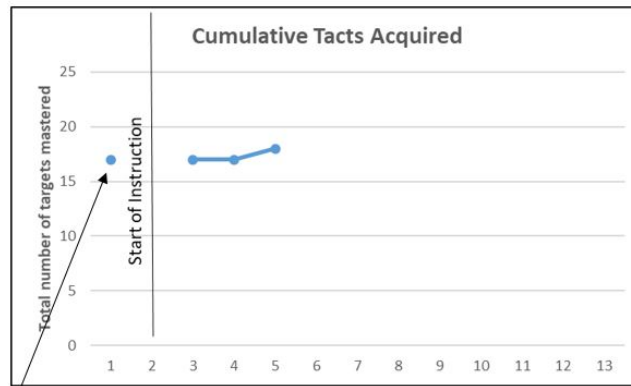- Job/vocational skills

Make sure to document your assessment data. You may use the assessment summary data document from the PaTTTAN resource file (see link below) included in the data systems folder under "behavioral language assessments."

Student Programming:

1. Start programming as soon as possible. Even if you have not completed the assessment in its entirety, you want to begin instruction as soon as possible for areas of need. As you continue with the assessment, you can make programmatic changes as needed.
2. Remember, there are variables that will affect students' success and acquisition of meaningful skills:
   a. Sequencing instruction from component to composite
   b. Sequencing targets within programs from easy to hard
   c. High rates of student responding
   d. Brisk pace of instruction
   e. Using teaching procedures (prompt/prompt fading) that result in correct responding
   f. Immediate feedback/reinforcement
   g. Interspersing easy tasks with target skills at a ratio of about 80% easy to 20% target/hard items.
3. Keep in mind these same instructional guidelines apply for teaching skill sets such as wearing and keeping on a mask.

Graphing for New Students:

As soon as you identify active programs to teach, and any known items the student has for that particular program selected, you will develop a graph with the first dot plotted so that it indicates how many skills the student already has in that program upon assessment. Then draw a phase change line to indicate start of instruction.
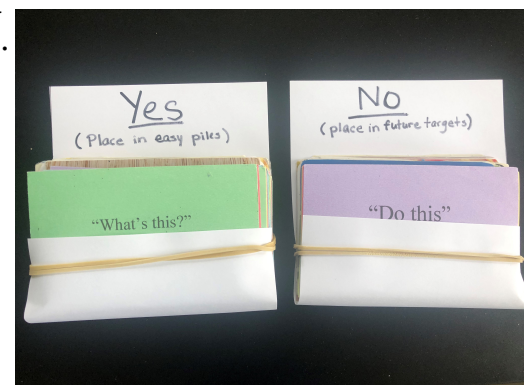

Total known items at end of assessment

Returning Students:

1. Instructional programs/teaching should begin for returning students almost immediately. However, keep in mind that you may have to re-establish instructional control and responding by starting all instructional sessions with pairing and opportunities for the student to mand.
2. Refer to the new student section for guidelines.
3. Differential Reinforcement – providing better reinforcement for better responding will allow you to re-establish responding and instructional control more quickly.
4. Set their reinforcement schedules slightly below their previously established schedules. In other words, provide more dense reinforcement than what you had been providing before school closure.

Returning Student Assessment:

1. Start working on updating and reassessing known skills.
2. As you reassess known skills using the student's existing materials, develop Yes/No piles to keep track of any items that student errors on.
   a. If an error occurs, be sure to use a correction procedure immediately and practice that skill throughout the day.
   b. Remember that errors include any wrong response, a self-correction or a response after about two seconds have passed.
   c. Any items the student misses during the initial assessment should be placed on the "No" pile and reassessed the next day. If they get the item incorrect two days in a row, the item should be considered "Lost" and set aside for retargeting (re-teach).
   d. Adjust the student's graphs to reflect the correct number of known skills.
   e. Re-target any "lost" skills before introducing new targets, unless there are new items that would be a priority to teach. *Photo example of Yes/No card piles.*
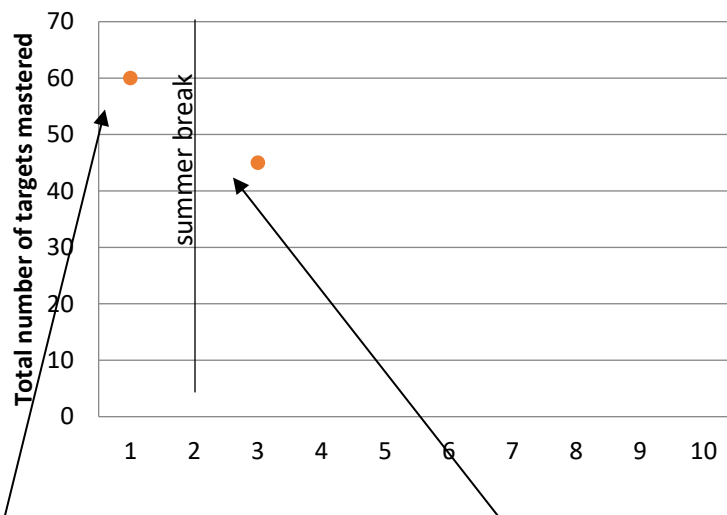
Returning Student Programming

1. For returning students, start programming (cold probing and teaching) just as you would after an extended break during the school year.
2. You should start programming using the last probe sheet that was developed while you are reassessing for any lost skills. In other words, you would start with the last active probe shee the student had on the last day of school.

Graphing:

For returning students, continue graphing where the graphs left off at the end of last school year. Once the re-assessment is complete, adjust the graph to indicate if skills have been lost. Add a phase change line labeled "Reassessment."
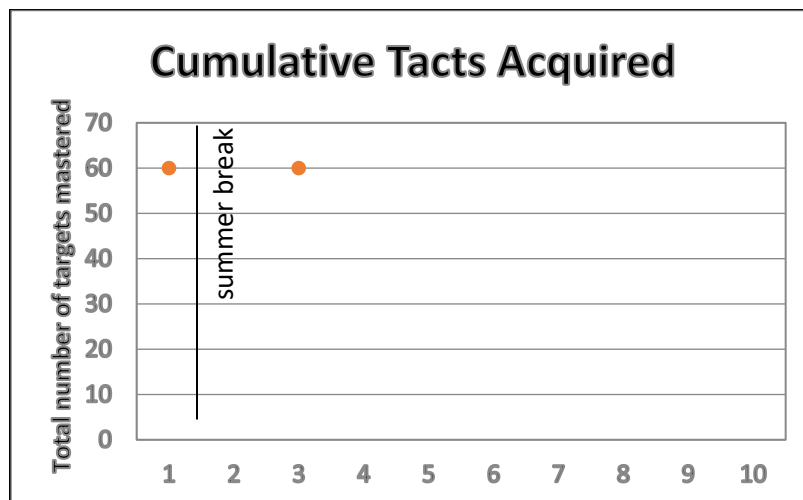
CumulativeTacts Acquired

Indicates the cumulative number of targets the student had at the end of last year

Indicates the number of targets student has at beginning of the current year.

In the above example, the student had 60 cumulative tacts mastered, and after summer break has 45. This indicates the student was unable to retain 15 of the tacts previously mastered.

- The graphs for programs in which the student did not lose any skills will continue where you left off (without connecting data points); however, you should still note the summer break on the graph. So in the example above, if the student did not lose any skills, the graph would look like this:

Cumulative Tacts Acquired

NOTE: *For both new and returning students, you may need to prioritize certain programs/skills such as:*

1. Hand washing
2. Using hand-sanitizer independently.
3. Wearing/tolerating mask or other face covering as required.
4. Computer skills: using a mouse, touch screen, responding to staff on a screen, etc., in the event that virtual instruction would have to resume.

Classroom Organization

1. Follow guidelines in the classroom organization document that you will find in the classroom environment folder on the resource files.
2. Consider classroom environment set up, to include furniture set-up and materials organization to allow for following health and safety guidelines, while ensuring that the students' instructional and behavioral needs are met. Some examples may include:
   o Having each student assigned to an instructional area rather than rotating to different stations.
3. You should have a schedule up and running (use guidelines for developing schedules in the classroom organization folder).
4. "Clean up the program books":
   o Remove any information you are not using this school year, label a folder with the previous school year and its content, and file this for future reference if necessary.
   o Make sure you have tabs for all operants for which you have active programs.
   o You should have a skill tracking sheet and a graph for each active program.
   o Again, you can refer to the program book procedures for further detail (in the program books folder, under classroom organization in the materials organization folder).

Behavior Management Considerations:

Students may be just as eager to return to school as their teachers. However, it may also be the case that the time away from the school routine, the increase in free access to reinforcement while in the home environment, lack of practice of some coping skills you may have already taught, and other factors, may result in teachers being faced with managing challenging behaviors at higher rates than before. Because the safety of everyone is priority, until formal processes are in place (FBA, PSBP, etc.), here are some tips to consider:

1. Focus on active engagement...keep them busy!
2. Make sure they access good things when not engaging in problem behavior!
3. Ensure successful responding and follow successful responding with reinforcement.
4. The way you talk to them matters:
   - Say what you want them to do
   - Use behavior specific praise and feedback
   - Tone of voice: speak pleasantly. Stay neutral and firm even when things get rough
   - Avoid calling attention to the problem behavior
5. Balance demands/non-preferred with preferred events.
6. Prevention is key. Some helpful strategies to prevent problem behavior that are triggered by common issues:

- Use a <u>Promise Reinforcer</u>: When interrupting students from preferred events, asking them to give up something valuable, asking them to do something hard/non-preferred.
  - Purpose is to offer a potential reinforcer when the child is presented with a situation that has historically lead to engagement in problem behavior
  - The promise works to offset the value of engaging in maladaptive behavior or decrease the severity of the maladaptive behavior to avoid or escape such a task
  - Teaching Procedure:
    - Identify a variety of potential reinforcers- food is easiest and most consistent, but can be anything of value
    - A few seconds prior to delivering the demand to transition/interrupt/deny access to/etc. hold out the item so the child can see it is available
    - Present the instruction while holding out the reinforcer
    - If the child cooperates/accepts without engaging in maladaptive behavior deliver the 'promised' reinforcer
- Use an <u>Alternative Reinforcer</u>: When denying a desired item/activity.
  - Purpose is to offer an alternative reinforcer when the child is denied something and the denial has historically lead to engagement in problem behavior
  - The alternative offsets the value of the reinforcer being denied and therefore prevents the maladaptive behavior or decreases the severity of it

Considerations for Virtual Instruction

Keep in mind that any decisions regarding specific student plans or any recommendations reviewed are the responsibility of IEP teams and you should continue to follow district directives in regards to such decisions. Following is an outline of the considerations to keep in mind for students receiving virtual instruction:

1. Being sensitive to, and determining the needs and priorities of families, may require some further assessment on family circumstances and environment. Following are some of the questions that may assist the district/teacher in obtaining information that will identify variables, which may affect potential instructional decisions:
   - Current circumstances in household such as:
     - Other children
     - Working parents
     - Are any of the parents working outside of the home?
     - Single parent?

2. Technology:
   - Audio/mic and video/camera capability
   - Student's ability to respond to technology
   - Student's ability to remain focused on teacher/materials on screen
   - For students using iPads, screen can be lock to avoid drifting to other sites' games: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBxRWKsybKQ
   - Consider setting up pre-meeting with parent to assess above issues

- Even if student is independent, clear communication with families is more likely to result in successful students. Therefore, it is helpful to review the plan with caregivers (priorities, instructional delivery, enrichment activities, time of potential sessions, what necessary supports might look like, etc.)

3. Identify family priorities, which may look vastly different from priorities for the classroom. Some specific things that may be helpful to families during this time may be:

   - Support parents in making a list of activities in the home that need to be done every day (family routines). This would allow the teacher to provide parents with support in how they can get through these.

   - Support parents in developing a schedule of the day that allows them to keep their child engaged. This is beneficial because it may help the child practice some skills they have mastered as well as minimize likelihood of problem behavior. Keep in mind that in some cases a structured schedule may not be feasible. In such cases, you can assist parents in planning daily routines that may not always happen at the same exact time but have a flow and order to help establish routines.

   - Consider prioritizing daily needs/ADLs for scheduling and possibly for potential instructional focus: washing, dressing, breakfast/snacks/lunch/pm snack/dinner time, daily chores (making bed, cleaning up toys, etc.).

   - Assist parents on how to prevent and minimize problem behavior (more details below).

   - Assist parents with identifying other activities that can help keep the children engaged (the less unplanned time, the better).

   - These additional activity times can be used for reinforcement time/free time for child and free time for the parent (reinforcement is earned for doing something even if only a chore such as getting dressed!). However, this should not be the only reinforcement available for students. It is critical to maintain student's variable ratio schedules of reinforcement if you provide planned instruction to the extent possible. It may be necessary to adjust the schedule, since for some students it may be more effortful to respond.

   - Additionally, do not forget that it is always a good idea to provide direct reinforcement immediately after better responding (e.g. catch them being good, providing small amounts of preferred food or brief access to preferred activities when the student responds to a demand accurately).

   - It may be appropriate to use the instructional time to practice independent skills: assist parent in identifying some independent activities that the child can do based upon materials the parent already has at home. Consider any other materials needed and how the parents can access them.

   - If there are other children at home, encourage the family to keep a consistent schedule for all children whenever possible.

- It may be helpful for families to be provided with training on reinforcement and its effective use.

- Consider that for some children, a token system may be a possibility but parents will need very simple, basic training on this (and the token system would probably be best to indicate to the child that exchange of token = 'free time' for reinforcement).

- In some cases, it may be appropriate to provide reinforcement so long as no problem behavior is occurring and they engaged in the scheduled activity (not necessarily with any teaching targets to start).

- Initially, virtual sessions may consist of conditioning the new instructional environment (desk, chair, room, etc.) with access to the best reinforcers (e.g., playing their favorite song, playing a game, etc.). Parents and teaching staff would focus, initially on teaching the child to engage and value instruction through the virtual mode chosen (e.g., zoom, Google classroom, FaceTime, app, website, etc.).

- Consider coaching with parents on limiting access to a reinforcer to one at a time and for no more than 30 minutes consecutively (avoiding satiation and habituation!).

- Some parents may need help organizing and controlling access to reinforcers in the home. Encourage them to gather ALL toys and reinforcers and place them where students do not have access (under parent control) in a closet or bin.

- Determine if there are any times of day in which the parent is significantly struggling with the child more than other times (e.g., always engages in problem behavior around 2:00 p.m. or always at bedtime).

- Discuss the importance of preventing problem behavior and offer any support to emphasize prevention and minimization of problem behavior (e.g., engagement, promise reinforcement, brief periods of instruction, dense schedule of reinforcement, etc.).

4. Instructional variables to consider:
   - Once you have conditioned approach and responding to you, and device for fun activities as described above, you may begin to fade in instruction:
     o This may mean you start with one or two 5-minute sessions in the daily schedule.
     o Start with easies and skills the student likes to respond to first
     o Consider limitations on the type of trials and whether you can prompt (e.g., cannot prompt imitation responses across a Zoom meeting)
     o Instruction pace may need to be slower so images, audio are not distorted
     o Consider placement of materials to ensure students have access to any visual stimuli being used and you have access to observe the student's response

5. Selecting targets: focus on teaching speaker skills (Tacts, Mands, Echoics):
    - Prioritize targets in the home environment
    - Use real-life objects and pictures cards (see resource file under materials organization folder)
    - Error correction may need to be modified
        o Consider providing correct answer and moving on
    - Avoid Escape Extinction

6. Consider your own needs as a teacher and how you will plan for instruction. Communicate openly with your principal/supervisor so they can support you in the best way possible. They are as concerned about you and your situation as they are about the students. Here are some of the considerations that may impact scheduling and or/planning for instruction:
    - If delivering instruction from home:
        o Current circumstances in household
        o Other children at home?
        o Single parent? Spouse works but out of the home?
        o Other
    - If delivering instruction from school setting:
        o If also providing live instruction, schedule arrangement to allow adequate attention to students who are in classroom vs. virtual
    - In both settings:
        o Technology availability
        o Does your technology work appropriately for what you need? Audio/mic and video/camera capability
        o Your own ability to conduct instruction with new technology
        o Training needs to develop or implement planned virtual instruction.

7. Consider how you will document instructional delivery and parent communication.

8. Consider types of instructional delivery formats and considerations for effective instructional delivery: planned virtual instruction, enrichment, or combination of both. For each of those options, consider:

    - Individual student session, what are the circumstances that may allow for:
        o Independent student responding
        o Responding with Support
    - Group Instruction (Direct Instruction, NET, Dyad/Small Group)
        o Can students log on at same time for a group lesson?
        o Can students respond independently?

Resources:

Visit the **PaTTAN Website**, www.pattan.net, for new resources added regularly (look for "Continuity of Education Resources")

Continuity of Education Planning Resources:
- Supports for Educators: https://www.pattan.net/Disabilities/Autism/COVID-19/Supports-for-Educators
- Supports for Families: https://www.pattan.net/Disabilities/Autism/COVID-19/Supports-for-Families

National Autism Conference Archives: https://autism.outreach.psu.edu/archive/
This resource contains years of archived presentations (and handouts) available for immediate use and covers a variety of topics. PaTTAN educational consultants can help you navigate through the archives and guide selections by relevance to your team. Most of these are 2.5-3 hours in length.

Links to sessions and webinars that may be of particular interest at this time:
Virtual Instruction for Students with Autism: from the Supporting Students with Disabilities in Virtual Environments Webinar:
- Part 1- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijter1BQMzk&feature=youtu.be
- Part 2- https://youtu.be/dDt4SS_tDb0
- Part 3- https://youtu.be/3_7No7oFAQ8

Virtual Instruction for Students with Autism: from the National Autism Conference:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3rouj6ji20&feature=emb_logo

The Role of Appropriate Instruction in Reducing Problem Behavior:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhdHJn30d6c&feature=emb_logo

Behavior Management for an Enjoyable and Safe Home and Community Life:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2017&v=JlxtSA3W5x0&feature=emb_logo

The Learner is Always Right: Instructional Design Practices for Individuals with Autism
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tieVPd9ceqY&feature=emb_logo

Basic Sign Vocabulary: A Tutorial for those who Work with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7023&v=5IYk1CFTmkY&feature=emb_logo

A Year in the Life of a First Year Autistic Support Teacher
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZgFBvj7DyE&feature=emb_logo

What To Do When You Are Too Busy: Managing Complex Autism Support Classroom-Based Services
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moK49zChf7E&feature=emb_logo

Resource file link: http://webapps.pattan.net/files/PaTTANAutismResources.zip
- o Directions: Enter this address in your web browser.
- o Then download onto your computer desktop.
- o Depending on your system's speed, it could be 5 minutes to 30 minutes.
- o Thousands of documents are available from this resource file to assist in your consultative process. PaTTAN educational consultants will need this file accessible for each consultation.
- o Also, do not save things into this file for it is updated regularly and it is generally recommended to delete the old file and download the new file.