INVISIBLE RULES

Invisible rules are the habits and behaviors that are expected in certain environments. They are the unspoken social norms and expectations that are in our homes, schools and communities. The rules can change based on the environment and the people. How a student should respond to an adult can be very different than how they should respond or interact with a peer. This can be confusing for some students with disabilities. Every teacher and every classroom can have their own set of posted rules which is difficult enough, but the invisible rules make it even more challenging. Successful students understand how the classroom works. They typically know what behavior is appropriate and how to relate to peers. Students figure this out by using their previous knowledge and experiences while reading subtle cues from others in the environment. All of this learning is invisible. Some students may need more repetition or reminders to pick up on those cues.

You can play a vital role by identifying what may be 'invisible' in a classroom or with a peer to an individual or small group of students. You can help students learn how to do this for themselves by encouraging observation of others by saying things like "what are your friends doing right now?" or "notice everyone is getting out a folder and a pencil". You can also use think-aloud strategies to point out cues in the environment like "when I hear the bell, I know it is time to line up". These invisible rules may be very obvious to you, but can cause anxiety, frustration of embarrassment for many students. If you can make the 'invisible' more 'visible', then you will help students succeed.

Discussion Topics

- Make a list of some of the invisible rules that you have noticed in your school or classrooms that you support.
- Think about the students who struggle with understanding those invisible rules.
- Share with your team some ideas for how you can prompt students and help make the unwritten rules more visible.

WHAT IS AN IFSP? ITP?

Special education plans offer the blueprint for students with disabilities. Last month, we learned about the IEP which is the overall plan for school-age students. However, there are additional plans that support students with special needs at other times in their life.

An Individualized Family Service Plan, or IFSP, is an early intervention program to help families of children from birth to age three who have disabilities. The goal is to help prepare children to learn in school. Children may be referred by a doctor or families can reach out for services to the Early Intervention Agency in their state if they have concerns about their child's development. IFSP's consider a child's abilities in the following areas: physical and developmental skills, communication skills, home environment, ability to cope with home environment, potential need for communication devices or adaptive devices to improve physical function. A big part of these services is working in the home with families to model and coach how to help their child throughout their day so they can learn the skills that they need. Prior to a child's third birthday, there is a transition step to determine if the student would qualify for an IEP and attend preschool with an IEP to support their disabilities or if they have made enough progress and do not need an IEP. Students may come to the school system after having an IFSP, but if you are employed by a school district, then you will probably not work with students with current IFSP's.

An Individualized Transition plan or ITP is a plan to help students with disabilities transition from school to adulthood. The ITP is developed by the student's IEP team when they are 14-16 years of age and can follow a student until they reach 22 to 26 years of age depending on the state requirements for school-based services. ITP's are helpful in determining what supports and activities an individual will need to live as independently as possible. It allows students to set goals about future education like college or vocational training, job interests and employment or finding an appropriate or assisted living environment.

These plans should be developed with input from the individual and their family. Realistic goals for home and community should be created based on a student's strengths, needs and interests. Goals and services should be based on a plan that provides a path to reach their goals, access potential community support services, income or access to income, planned living arrangements, available community activities and availability of transportation. Students should also learn life skills like self-care, cooking, managing a household, time and money management.

If you work in a high school or with students receiving Transition Services, then you work with students who have an ITP and should know the goals for the student. A student can have an IEP and an ITP. There are skills that the student can learn in high school that will help support them with their future goals for their post-school life as an adult.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

AAC ADVICE

I D E A S   TO   C O M M U N I C A T E

Augmentative and Alternative Communication or AAC is resource that students with special needs may use to support their communication needs. AAC includes all forms of communication other than oral speech used to express thoughts, ideas, wants and needs. Here are some foundational guiding principles to use with students learning to use AAC:

Make sure students have access to their system at all times. If they can't reach it or see it, they won't use it. Do not turn down the volume or put the device away if the student is "making too much noise" or "talking out of turn". Their communication system is their voice and you can't take it away. If there was a speaking student interrupting, blurting out or talking too loudly, you could not force them to stop talking. You would have to use other strategies to set the expectations. This needs to be done with our AAC users too.

Encourage AAC use without requiring it. There are many forms of communication. Eye-gaze, facial expressions, signs and gestures can all help a student get a message across. If the student nods "yes" or shakes their head "no", then they do not also have to say it on their device. Wait patiently for the student to initiate or respond. Some students need up to 30 seconds or more to process the request and then more time to plan the motor movement to respond.

Providing modeling to teach the use of an AAC device can support the development of oral speech. As communication partners point to and say words on the device, their speech slows down allowing the AAC user time to process the message. Modeling is when you demonstrate the skill that you are want the student to learn and describe what you are doing. You should get permission from the student to model on their AAC device and not just grab it from them.

Work at the language level of each individual and expand a little. Model 1-2 words beyond their communication level, just like you would do for a student that is speaking. For example, if the student selects "go" on their device, model "go outside" or "go walk" depending on where you think they want to go.

Create natural communication opportunities to model language and use their AAC device or communication system throughout the day. A student will not become a good user of their device if they only practice with it in certain situations or with certain people. The student needs to see a word modeled repeatedly in different contexts. Math, literacy, science and social studies are structured times each day to model key concepts like more/less, shapes, colors, numbers, question words and vocabulary. Lunch, snack, PE and recess are great times to model and practice requesting items, asking and answering questions, sharing about preferred items and interacting socially.

It's possible there are multiple students in your school using different AAC devices or programs. It can become overwhelming quickly so reach out to the SLP or teacher at your school. It is important feel comfortable asking questions so you can support the student in their learning of how to use the device or system. The more familiar you are with AAC devices, the more likely it is that you will use them when modeling communication.

SAY THIS, NOT THAT

S U P P O R T I N G   B E H A V I O R

Kids and young adults can easily become emotionally overwhelmed or irritated in a situation and may begin to express their emotions in irrational or challenging ways. This may include refusing to follow directions, aggressive posturing, yelling, swearing or throwing things. These situations can become power struggles or quickly escalate to something worse. De-escalating the situation focuses on helping the student get their emotions back to a typical level. It does not mean letting the student get away with the behavior. However, it is critical to help the student get to a calmer state before discussing the behavior and expectations. It is very difficult to learn new strategies to cope with challenges when you are escalated.

"It is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a person humanized or de-humanized." Haim G. Ginott

When you are speaking to an upset student, it is critical that your tone and body language remain calm and respectful so you do not increase the tension in the room. It may be helpful to lower your voice and keep a neutral expression. You may make a situation worse if you say, "stop that now", "you need to calm down" or "you are going to be in big trouble". There are a variety of helpful phrases to choose from that can help calm the situation. You could choose one or two of the phrases or questions below to try to de-escalate the situation.

Phrases: I want to help you. I'm here for you. Talk to me. I'm listening. You can do this. Let's call …….., I think they can help. Let's talk about this later. I see where you are coming from. I see your point. You're not in trouble.

Questions: What would help right now? Would it help if…..? Is there someone we can call to help? Is there someone that you would like to talk to? So you are upset because….. right? Can you tell me what you are upset about?

With the questions, you may not be able to provide what they request and that is okay. You can let them know that you understand what they want, but it is not possible right now. If you find questions lead to more behavior or more attempts to power struggle if the student does not get what they request, then rely more on phrases with that student in the future.

Think about how you would feel if you were upset and someone used one of the above phrases or questions with you. How would you feel? Could it help you to feel supported? Are there other phrases or questions that would help? During an escalated situation, it can be hard to remember how to respond. Picking a couple of the phrases or questions above that feel comfortable for you to use may be the first step in adding them to your behavior toolbox. Once they are part of your strategies, then you can use them to help calm students when they are feeling emotional.

Reflections

- Are you aware of the goals, accommodations, modifications that the students have?
- If you are not or there are things you do not understand how to implement or