T.O.V.A.® Individualized Success Strategies: School

INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of an attention problem is the variability (inconsistency) of performance across settings and tasks, and over time. Do not assume that if there is high performance on some tasks that low performance on other tasks is due to low motivation and willfulness. Students do better on tasks that they find inherently interesting and stimulating. They tend to do worse on tasks that require sustained attention and are more mundane to them. They often have difficulty with tasks that require complex problem-solving strategies. There is continued difficulty with "executive processes", strategies that are used to organize and monitor thinking and action. They may be "stuck" using strategies that are ineffective. Although they may be verbally adept, they may have difficulty with written assignments, or vice-versa. Tasks that require extensive fine motor skills may also be difficult.

The following strategies are helpful for students with attention problems or who need more structure in the classroom. It is recommended that the student for whom the strategies are targeted be involved in choosing and implementing these strategies when appropriate. This develops ownership for the results and decreases resistance. These strategies are best used in conjunction with similar strategies in the home environment. It is recommended that open communication be maintained with parents, health care providers, and the student.

Please review the strategies that have been marked in the box beside the title. These are the current strategies to be implemented and practiced.

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T.O.V.A.® Individualized Success Strategies: School

Name:_____   Date:_____

CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

Classroom structure and organization are vital to the success of students. Visual cues, consistency, structured learning, and prior planning create an optimal environment for success.

☐ **Appropriate Classroom Environment**

Some students do better in classrooms with four walls than in an "open pod" arrangement. Open pods may allow too many visual and auditory distractions throughout the day.

☐ **Best Seat Location**

If the student is primarily visually distractible, the student's desk can be near the teacher (for prompting and redirection), away from other challenging students, and not touching others' desks. However, if the student is primarily auditorily distractible, there may be benefit from being seated near the rear of the classroom. This eliminates the need to constantly look around to identify the sources of the distracting sounds.

☐ **Visual Schedule**

The student will function better when able to anticipate times requiring increased concentration. A visual representation of the day's schedule will provide the opportunity to internalize classroom routine.

☐ **Give Breaks**

Along with breaking up the need for sustaining attention for a long period, the student may do better when allowed frequent breaks to move around inside and outside the classroom. This may vary from a daily outside walk to doing errands around the building, to classroom stretching exercises. The student may need a place to unwind and reduce stress during the school day. Often times this can be as simple as providing a place for sitting alone, using the computer, taking a short walk, drawing, or modeling with clay. After ten to fifteen minutes, the student will likely be able to access the energy needed to attend to the classroom.

☐ **Small Student-Teacher Ratio**

A small student to teacher ratio enables an increased amount of feedback during prime times of difficulty. Attempt to involve parent volunteers, paraprofessionals, or support staff in this capacity.

☐ **Decrease Distractions**

To provide an engaging classroom for the student, try to be aware of the auditory and visual distractions present. Attempt to place the student where these would have the least effect.

☐ Limit Personal Items

Many students often bring their own distracters (toys, cell phones, handheld video games) from home. Classroom rules about appropriate time and place are helpful for sharing items with classmates. Establishing certain categories for classroom sharing on certain days can limit the number and type of items brought to school and make it more successful for all students.

☐ Schedule Demanding Tasks at Optimal Times

Some students may have problems focusing and controlling impulsivity throughout the day while others have particular times of the day when they do much better. If possible, schedule the most attention demanding tasks when the student functions best.

☐ Have Student Paraphrase Directions

After giving the student directions, have them paraphrase what the teacher has said. This will increase comprehension and provide an opportunity to confirm understanding.

☐ Restructure Inaccurate Perceptions

By having students think "out loud" when they are problem-solving, the teacher will gain insights into their reasoning style, and the process will slow them down before they respond impulsively. This will provide information about how they see the world and enable the teacher to restructure inaccurate perceptions.

☐ Appropriate Work Areas

Some students more often complete their tasks when they are able to work in an area with few visual and auditory distractions. As an example, completing school work in noisy classrooms or open areas can be difficult. In contrast, some actually attend to tasks better with some unobtrusive background sound and action. Described as "white noise", repetitive background sound can mask or cover up potentially distracting noises, such as other students' talking or playground noises.

☐ Maintain Student's Focus

The student may get overwhelmed with large assignments. Attention may wander after guided practice on similar tasks. Adjust the assignment down to smaller units. Give the assignment one sheet at a time. Consider assigning fewer problems. Cut apart single worksheets into strips. Schedule a break after this period of optimum attention and then return to the assignment.

☐ Staying Present Until Task Starts

Students may get distracted and not begin a task, even after receiving and seemingly understanding directions. Staying with the student until the task has begun will increase the likelihood that the task will be completed.

PERSONAL SKILLS

Self-reflection and the ability to receive feedback are important skills for student success. Practice these strategies as needed to develop insight, follow-through in tasks, and positive self-esteem.

☐ Verbalizing Mental Processing

By having students think out loud when problem-solving, you will gain insights into their reasoning style and slow them down before they respond impulsively. This will provide data for you about how they see the world and enable you to begin to restructure inaccurate perceptions.

☐ Avoiding Fatigue

The concept that our behavior and performance worsens as we get tired is true for many of us, and it is especially true for some students. It is important to analyze the individual's energy levels during the day and attempt to have them do their work and other responsibilities before they become fatigued.

☐ Identifying Impulsivity

Acting impulsively before thinking through the consequences of behavior is a frequent problem for some students. This often appears as a lack of understanding of cause and effect. Students may be able to verbalize the rules but have difficulty internalizing them and translating them into thoughtful behavior. Difficulties in delaying gratification also add to impulsivity. Behavioral disinhibition (difficulty inhibiting or controlling behavior) may be a primary manifestation and may be even more important than their ability to pay attention.

☐ "I" Messages

Model the use of "I" messages. "I need this to be done before we go out for recess" may work better than "You need to do your work before recess". Using "I" messages to communicate needs and wants models taking responsibility for thoughts and feelings.

☐ Self-Evaluation

Provide opportunities for self-evaluation and self-reflection on a weekly basis. Choose specific times each week to have the student evaluate performance on tasks and social interactions. Review successes, frustrations, and difficulties. Create a plan for the next week based on the self-evaluation. Include self-stated goals to increase the chances for success.

☐ Eye Contact

Establish eye contact when giving the student direction or instruction or engaging in conversation. This will improve their understanding and follow-through on the tasks, and help develop awareness of personal and social cues.

☐ Stop-Think-Talk-Do: Utilize "Slow Down" Techniques

The technique of "Stop-Think-Talk-Do" is central to many cognitive-behavioral interventions. It is a system that teaches the student how to "stop" before acting impulsively, "think" about the cause-and-effect relationships of their intended behavior, "talk" or verbalize to themselves or others what they will do, and then "do" the chosen behavior. The purpose of the technique is to reduce impulsivity.

☐ Self-Monitoring

Encouraging the student to monitor their own behavior has many benefits. It can provide an opportunity for discussion when the student and the teacher agree or disagree on performance ratings. It also promotes the development of the student's internal frame of reference.

SOCIAL SKILLS

The development of social skills is a key factor for interpersonal success. Certain students experience social difficulties, especially with peer relationships. They tend to experience difficulty picking up others' social cues, act impulsively, have limited awareness of their effect on others, and display delayed role-taking ability. They over-personalize others' actions as being criticism, and they tend not to recognize positive feedback. They may play better with younger or older children when their roles are clearly defined. These students may repeat self-defeating social behavior patterns and not learn from experience. Conversationally, they may ramble and say embarrassing things to peers. Areas and times with less structure and less supervision, such as the playground and class parties, can be especially problematic. Implementing these strategies together models teamwork and shared success. The following strategies may be used to increase awareness of self and others, develop skills in group settings, and prepare for future stages of development.

☐ Peer Support

Enlisting the support of peers in the classroom can greatly enhance the student's self-esteem. Students with good social awareness, who like to be helpful, can be paired with them. This pairing can take the form of being a "study buddy", doing activities or projects, or playing on the playground. Cross-age tutoring with older or younger students can also have social benefits. Most successful pairing is done with adequate preparation of the paired students—such as planning meetings with the pair to set expectations—and with parental permission. Expectations and time commitments should initially be limited in scope to lessen the constraints on the paired students.

☐ Practice Social Skills

Small "play groups" of two to four students can help the student develop more effective social skills. These groups are most effective if socially competent peers are willingly included in the group. The group should be focused on activities that stress interaction and cooperation. Board games, building projects, and sessions that promote frequent verbal interactions provide the greatest opportunity for learning appropriate social skills and controlling impulsivity. The student would benefit most when the targeted social skills are identified and practiced with them before the activity and processed after it.

☐ Guiding Observation

A subtle way for the student to learn social skills is through the use of guided observation of their peers on the playground. Accompany them on to the playground and point out the way other students initiate activities, cooperate in a game, respond to rejection, deal with being alone, etc. After some practice, the student can go out and report back on the experience. Willing playground supervisors can often provide this function on a periodic basis.

☐ Role-Playing

Quite often, students will continue to have difficulty with certain types of interactions, including difficulty in taking turns, over-interpreting others' remarks as hostile, personalizing others' actions excessively, and misreading social cues. With the help of the student, the teacher, and their trusted peers, common problematic themes can be identified. Role-play hypothetical interactions involving these behaviors, preferably with supportive peers, identifying and practicing positive alternative responses. Have the student practice these responses during the school day and have them and others give feedback on their success. Identifying critical incidents that occur during the day will provide insights for program planning.

☐ Review Social Plans

It is helpful to talk with the student about lunchroom and playground activities and review plans for activities. Have them ask peers in advance to join them. Process the activity with the student afterward and make suggestions for the following day.

☐ Identify a Support Network

It is important to help the student identify a support network of peers and adults who can advise when to slow down and can also practice the slow down techniques mentioned in this section. Peers and adults in this network may best be served by having some understanding of attention problems and practicing the procedure with a professional skilled in the technique.

☐ Control the Environment for Highly Social Children

Some students may be very active socially. This can cause distractions in the classroom as well as for the student. Excessive talking, interruptions, clowning around, and focusing on interactions with others are common. Maintaining control of the environment for these children to maintain focus on schoolwork and tasks is extremely important. Seat selection, elimination of extraneous stimuli, partnering with quieter students, and positive feedback for task completion may be needed to keep these students in proper balance.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

The following strategies can be chosen to suit the needs of the student and the classroom.

☐ Utilize I.E.P.'s

Some students respond poorly to institution-wide classroom behavioral systems. Whether or not there is a formal behavioral program for all students, the student will benefit from an individualized approach, in which target behaviors are specifically identified and rewards or consequences are fairly immediate.

☐ Communication with Parents

Maintain monthly conferences and ongoing communication with parents and guardians to stay current on treatment plans and to provide feedback on school performance and social interactions.

☐ Match Student Learning Styles with Appropriate Teaching Style

Teachers tend to instruct using their own preferred learning style and degree of structure. For some students, a highly structured teacher is better. For others, a more flexible teacher best meets their needs. It is important to match the student's needs to the teaching style in the classroom.

☐ Include Student in Goal Setting

Identifying the student's goals with them is effective. Goals should begin by being simple and easy to understand. Two to three goals are sufficient. The criteria for success (or earning points) should be simple and clear. Successful goal attainment early in the process is critical. Ask the student to generate possible goals or have them choose from a menu that the teacher has created. The larger the role the student plays in identifying goals, the greater the investment they will have in reaching them.

☐ Focus on the Positive

Students respond well to positive feedback. Pointing out positive behaviors and social interactions focuses the student on what they do well. This encourages more appropriate behaviors and interactions.

☐ Break Seat Work and Tests into Small Sections

Give seat work one sheet at a time, if possible. This will prevent the student from feeling overwhelmed. This is also a helpful technique in testing students.

☐ Create Special Interest

The student may respond better to situations that are stimulating and engaging. Varying the instructional medium and pace will help sustain interest. The student may find lessons that emphasize "hands-on" activities highly engaging. Balance tasks that require sustained attention with active learning to improve performance. Changes in instructor's voice level and variation in word-pacing will also increase attention during instruction.

☐ Directions One Step at a Time

The student will be more successful when given directions one step at a time. When a series of instructions are given, retention beyond the first few directions may be difficult.

☐ Break Down Assignments and Homework

Completing school work and maintaining behavior during the school day can be exhausting experiences. Large homework loads on a regular basis can become discouraging for some students and very stressful for the involved parent. Attempt to reduce homework. If possible, limit guided practice on material that they have begun to master. Attempt to break down long-term assignments into steps to lessen the student's feeling overwhelmed. Consider having the student complete fewer problems, instead of answering each one. Emphasize practice and assignment completion on a computer to lower the frustration many students feel with written work.

☐ Monitor Student Frequently

Seat work can be very difficult. This can become compounded when the teacher is instructing another small group. Check on the student as much as possible or have them check in. Consider using a point system.

☐ Daily Assignment Sheets

Encourage the student to utilize assignment sheets, broken down by day and subject. The student or the teacher can record when the assignments have been completed. An organizing time at the end of each day can be helpful in gathering the necessary materials for the assignments and developing a plan of action for completion. This will greatly aid the development of executive processes.

☐ Have Student Check Completed Work

Emphasize that part of the work routine is to check your work. Some students tend to complete work and turn it in without checking it over. Help the student check their work and practice it with them. Use a point system, if needed.

☐ Verbal and Nonverbal Encouragement

It is important to pair verbal praise with a reward system. This will help them associate good behavior with positive feelings, moving from a concrete reward structure to an internalized system. Encourage the individual to also write or say self-affirmations ("I can do this"). A simple nod, wink, smile, or touch on the shoulder is a good positive reinforcement.

☐ Point Out Alternative Behaviors

Instead of confronting the student continually on activities and behaviors that are inappropriate, point out the alternative choices that are available. This will make the expectations clearer to them and avoid the negativity inherent in what they would perceive as criticism.

☐ Prearranged Visual Cues

Some students respond to a prearranged cueing system with the teacher. In this system, the teacher gives a visual signal (touching the ear) or verbal phrase ("Remember, it's reading time") when a targeted inappropriate behavior occurs. The cue can remind the student to correct behavior without direct confrontation or loss of self-esteem. It can involve the classroom teacher or any support personnel available to the student.

☐ Simple Organizational Systems

Some students can become overwhelmed with too many materials and be unable to find what's needed. It is often helpful to carry only two work folders: one that contains work to be completed, and one with work to be filed. Reviewing these work folders should become a regular part of the daily routine, with irrelevant work removed.

☐ Multiple Modalities

Combine verbal directions with illustrations or demonstrations of the desired task. Using multiple modes of instruction increases the probability of learning the task.

☐ Monitor Test Performance

Have someone actively monitoring the student during tests, especially multiple-choice tests. The student can get off track and fill in the wrong places or become so frustrated that answering may become random.

☐ Modify Test Environment

Consider modifying the test environment for the student, to accurately assess ability or achievement on subject areas and standardized tests. Individual administration in a distraction-limited area with frequent breaks will give a more accurate assessment than group administration.

☐ Wait to Receive Classroom Responses

Encourage thoughtful responding and decrease impulsivity by waiting 10 to 15 seconds to receive responses during whole group instruction. Calling on the first few students who raise their hands may increase impulsivity. This may discourage the student who is unable to organize and verbalize as quickly as other students.

☐ Group Projects

Some students may do well in a cooperative group instructional format if not overstimulated and distracted. Small student groupings of three to five members, in which the students "sink or swim" together to complete assignments or projects, encourage students to share organizational ideas and responsibilities. This may be an ideal setting for processing interpersonal skills on a regular basis.

☐ Class Meetings

Holding classroom meetings on a regular basis—to discuss concerns over assignments, activities, and interpersonal relationships–can help promote an atmosphere of respect and understanding.

☐ Group Goals

It is often helpful to take students who are charting or earning points, and group them for a small amount of time each day to work on a shared goal. This "Goal Group" can provide opportunities for peer support, become a time for positive modeling, and provide a basis for a group reward. Having both group and individual rewards provides support and encouragement.

☐ Bookend the Day with Organizational Activities

Along with the "executive process" of organizing for homework at the end of the day, a daily check-in time at the beginning of the school day may be helpful in preparing for a successful day. Checking the previous night's homework, highlighting changes in the daily schedule, and even pre-teaching some of the lessons for the day can ease stress.

☐ Manage Play Activity

For many students, thirty minutes on the playground is beyond their capability to maintain successful peer relationships. If necessary, break up the recess into three parts: an activity, a check-in with the teacher/playground supervisor, and then a return to activity. Limiting the area available for the student during recess can increase the contact with adult supervision and lessen the complexity of social decision-making. This can be done privately with the student prior to recess. Many students welcome this manner of simplifying their social interactions during this period of low structure.

☐ Keep Extra Set of Textbooks at Home

One of the simplest strategies with the highest return is having an extra set of textbooks at home, to minimize the problem of not having necessary homework materials.

☐ Weekly Cleanup Time

Some students need to have a regularly scheduled time each week to organize their desk. It may, however, require the assistance or instruction of an adult.

☐ Computers and Other Media

Some students work better with computers. This can help develop fine motor skills and can capture attention. Spell checking and teaching programs with visually stimulating graphics help students progress in studies. Video and audio taping are alternative methods to demonstrate mastery of subjects.

☐ Use Dictation If Needed

If the student is having great difficulty with research reports and creative writing assignments, have them dictate the words to someone rather than writing them down. The student can then copy the words by hand or using the computer. This technique will yield better results on tasks requiring expressive written-language skills by removing the written component.

☐ Use Technology To Focus Attention and Reduce Impulsivity

Stability ball chairs and brain development programs are some popular forms of technology that have been shown to increase attention and reduce impulsivity. Stay updated on new innovations.

☐ Friday Folders

Send folders with homework assignments, progress updates, and notes to parents or guardians each Friday. This gives the family the weekend to review and complete assignments. Having the parent sign the weekend folder may be helpful in drawing attention to it.

☐ Internet Updates

Provide daily and/or weekly updates on schoolwork, homework, and grades for parents on the school internet site.

REWARD AND POINT SYSTEMS

Point systems and rewards provide consistent positive feedback to students. Designs that are simple and easy to understand work best.

☐ Develop Positive Behavioral Rewards and Interventions

Some students can benefit greatly from behavioral interventions that are sensitive to their processing style. An individualized plan that emphasizes stimulating reinforcement on a consistent basis has a good chance of success. Consequences and reinforcement should be as immediate as possible. Feedback that is delayed or variable is problematic in that the student may have difficulty in correlating delay and gratification. Changing the reward periodically is usually necessary. A major consideration in forming an effective behavioral plan is assessing what is workable for the classroom teacher on a regular basis. Some plans that require extensive charting do not succeed because the teacher cannot follow through effectively within the context of daily classroom demands. Keeping the plan simple and flexible is necessary.

☐ Frequent Feedback and Point Systems

Prompt rewards and verbal praise on a continual basis are most effective in changing behavior. A "point system" provides immediate reinforcement and appropriate rewards based on behavior and interactions. Individuals earn points for a variety of accomplishments such as achieving prearranged goals that have been discussed and agreed to by the individual or for any valued activity or behavior that occurs spontaneously during the day. Point values are assigned to various tasks and behaviors with some flexibility to increase points or to give any assignment or activity a point value. Points are accumulated and cashed in on a reward menu. Points can be added on a continuous basis for a running total kept in a central area. This menu can be a hierarchy of reward activities based on the number of points. To be most effective, reward menus may be designed with the participation of the individual. The individual can request when to spend their points. It is important in any behavioral system that there be early success to maintain the individual's motivation. It is sometimes helpful to begin simply, to ensure that rewards are obtained during the week.

☐ Response/Cost Point Systems

A Response/Cost system includes gaining and losing points as a consequence for certain behaviors. Response/cost means that the individual will gain points for appropriate behaviors and lose points that have been accumulated as a consequence for inappropriate behaviors. Clearly defined positive and negative points are essential to success. Everyone involved should know exactly what to expect. The success of a response/cost system depends upon consistency in applying the agreed-upon positive and negative consequences. Working with a knowledgeable professional to create an individualized and effective response/cost system is advised.

☐ Engaging Charts, Punch Cards

It is important that behavior systems have a method for keeping track of points and goal attainment. Punch cards, on which the teacher punches a card when a goal is met, can be a vehicle for immediate reinforcement. Various games can be represented on the punch card, such as rounding bases to get to home plate, rounding a track to cross a finish line, or crossing a soccer field to score a goal. Involving the student in designing the chart or punch card may increase their buy-in to the plan. Once the agreed-upon number of punches are accumulated, the card may be exchanged for a reward.

☐ Co-create Rotating Rewards

Students respond well to rewards that they experience as highly engaging. Computer games, artistic media, and action-based play (sports or other physical activity), building sets, and activities outside of the school setting can be effective. Ask the student what they would like to earn. The student is the best source of identifying the reward. Rewards may need to be changed or rotated frequently to maintain their novelty power.

MEDICATION

☐ Planning for Optimal Use of Medication

The different medications that may be used to treat attention problems have different peaks and durations of effectiveness. For example, attention usually improves within 45 minutes after taking methylphenidate, and the effects usually last for 45 minutes to 4 1/2 hours. Other medications are different. If possible, it is best to schedule the most attention-demanding tasks during this medication window.

OTHER TREATMENTS

Understanding the effects of other treatments and their optimal use maximizes the benefits to the individual. Consistent communication with parents ensures appropriate treatment and follow-through.

☐ Other Treatments

Be aware of the potential interactions between medication and any other treatment, such as biofeedback, supplements, and diet.