

How can you get students with LD to change their behavior and habits?

Howard Margolis Monday, September 14, 2015

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Many parents of children with educational disabilities know their children need to rid themselves of behaviors and habits that jeopardize their future. They need to develop ones that propel and sustain progress. This, after all, is the primary aim of special education's Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), the volumes of legal decisions supporting it, and Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Thus, a critical question plaguing parents, teachers and researchers is: "How can we help children make changes vital to their future?" A more precise way of saying this is: "How can we help children develop the behaviors and habits vital to their futures?"

Though children differ in what behaviors and habits they need to develop, minimize or eliminate, the questions below may help you develop an informed view of what's apt to turn unsuccessful efforts to learn a new behavior or habit into successful ones.

1. Does your child (or student) get an adequate amount sleep?
2. Does he (or she) feel rested and refreshed when waking?
3. Does he eat a healthy, well-balanced diet?
4. Does he have the physical and cognitive abilities to develop the desired behavior or habit?
5. Does he understand the desired behavior or habit, and can he accurately and clearly envision it?
6. Does he believe this change — mastering the behavior or habit — will help him?
7. Does he believe this change — mastering the behavior or habit — is worth the effort?
8. Does he believe that within the next hour, day or week this change will help him achieve one of his personally important short-term goals?
9. Does he believe this change will help him achieve one of his personally important long-term goals?
10. Is his school, classroom or home replete with pictures that illustrate his personally important goals?
11. Does he see respected peers, teachers or others successfully performing the changes he's being asked to make?
12. Does he see peers like him, whom he likes, steadily learning to make the changes he's being asked to make?
13. Does he see peers like him, whom he likes, overcoming minor difficulties to successfully make the changes he's being asked to make?
14. Is he committed to mastering the changes?
15. Is the change presented in small, just-right steps upon which he can readily succeed?
16. Is he realistically optimistic he can succeed on each of the just-right steps he's asked to make?
17. Is he optimistic he can succeed if he makes a moderate, reasonable effort?
18. Is he trying to change one behavior or habit, or is he overwhelmed by having to change many?

19. Is he required to master large steps or complex procedures rather than small, manageable just-right ones?
20. Is he given numerous opportunities to correctly practice the change, in a step-by-step way?
21. Is he given frequent opportunities to correctly practice the change when steps are combined?
22. When he succeeds on one or a sequence of steps, does he get encouraging feedback that motivates him to continue efforts to master the change?
23. When he stumbles on one or a sequence of steps, does he get corrective and encouraging feedback that motivates him to continue efforts to master the change?
24. Is the change taking place in an environment, such as a school or classroom, that makes it easy for him to master the change?
25. Does he often see his peers carrying out the targeted behavior or habit?
26. Are his peers or a mentor frequently encouraging him to master the changes?
27. Is the change taking place in an environment, such as a school or classroom, that makes it difficult, impossible or unfulfilling to revert to old jeopardizing ways?
28. Are you teaching him how to use distraction, delay and distance to thwart temptations to revert to old jeopardizing ways?
29. Are you making real time or hour-by-hour records of his successes and frequently discussing his progress with him?
30. Are you using video-self modeling to show and discuss his successes with him?
31. Are you and his peers frequently reinforcing his successes in ways that motivate him?
32. Are you influencing him by maintaining or creating strong, positive relationships with him?
33. Do you and other involved parties frequently coordinate efforts and strategies to avoid confusing him, to provide plenty of carefully monitored, successful practices and to promote generalization?
34. Is he quietly crediting himself for making reasonable efforts, persisting and correctly using the right strategies in the right ways?
35. Does he correct his behavior, without self-recrimination, when he doesn't make a reasonable effort, persist or correctly use the right strategies in the right ways?
36. Do many of the opportunities for him to learn or practice the new behavior or habit occur when he's frustrated and fatigued, or when he feels alert and motivated?
37. Once he successfully masters a new behavior or habit, is he given ample opportunity to assist in helping younger children develop the same or similar behaviors and habits?

No doubt, many readers could raise other questions, but this long list may rejuvenate what you know, extend your knowledge and help you counteract most of the major reasons for a child's difficulties to master critical behaviors and habits. The list helps explain why change is tough.

Let me repeat: Change is tough. It's even tough for the "experts" who write about it. So have patience and remember that for children and adults to change, it needs to be easy — with modest effort, success needs to be well within reach.

The good news is that answering these questions can make it far easier for you to effectively support your child's (or student's) efforts and helping to provide the needed support and eliminate the almost invisible, but common barriers.

It's also important to remember that children and adults need clear-cut knowledge of the new behavior or habit and the actions needed to successfully make the changes. They also need the right environment, encouragement from the right peers, lots of feedback and encouragement from parents and teachers, and lots of opportunity to access or develop the skills to succeed. They also need parents and teachers who understand how new behaviors and habits develop and have a commitment to the paradoxical belief that "to go fast, you've got to go slow."

Change is tough, but need not be impossibly tough. For your child (or student), your job is to make it easy, satisfying and motivating. And when possible, spiced with fun.