**Proposal for Determining How to Gain/Maintain Authority with an Engaging Syllabus for Students Age 5 to 10 (on the Autistic Spectrum)**

for

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Table of Contents

Abstract--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------3

Introduction---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------4

Authority Types and Importance-------------------------------------------------------------------------5

Program Background---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------6

Methods-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------7

Data Section--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------8

Details of Behavioural Interventionists/Consultants Interviews-------------------------------8

Data limitations-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------8

Time Spent Gaining/Maintaining Attention--------------------------------------------------------9

Time Spent on Rewards-------------------------------------------------------------------------------9

Techniques used to express authority to maintain attention---------------------------------10

Techniques to keep course content engaging---------------------------------------------------11

Transitioning to teaching online in terms of authority------------------------------------------11

Recommendations for new Behavioural Interventionist struggling with control--------12

Techniques for gaining authority online-----------------------------------------------------------13

Conclusion--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------13

Summary of Findings----------------------------------------------------------------------------------13

Interpretation of Findings-----------------------------------------------------------------------------14

Recommendations-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------15

References--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------16

**Abstract**

**Introduction**

Since the middle of March 2020, Covid-19 has had enormous impacts on education. Schools across British Columbia, and the rest of the world, have had to shut down due to their potential to be huge transmission sites for the virus. Education is a vital aspect of our society and essential for future generations’ success and survival, and so there have been huge efforts to continue education in whatever way is possible. For most teachers this means moving to an online platform.

This transition can be a big struggle for educators, not only adjusting to a new platform, but finding a way to capture the attention of the children in an enriching and engaging way online. For behavioural interventionists, those teaching children on the autistic spectrum, the change over can be even harder. Screens have proved to be a very difficult platform for the delivery of education to children because they are faced with what can be hours of online learning, sitting in the same place with all the distractions of the internet right at their fingertips. Authority, because of this, is essential for a teacher to run lessons smoothly. In many cases it is the key to keeping the children abiding by the instructions.

Teachers lacking authority in the online platform can lead to hours of wasted time trying to gain the attention of students. This means that the children are not getting the instructional time and accumulating knowledge that they may need to continue their education. The implication is that time, energy, and money are being wasted due to the difficulties of online education, and there is an enormous need to find more efficient and effective ways to assist teachers during this pandemic. This problem has become especially prominent for behavioural interventionists and has led to many team meetings trying to address various difficult situations.

One of the proposed solutions is to make a guide for teachers, specifically behavioural interventionists, to gain authority in an online platform following the strict program requirements. Most students learn to respect the teacher because the teacher is (most often) the only adult in the classroom and they tend to have the ability to reprimand any behaviour that disrupts the teaching environment. Online, however, this is not the case (at least in the traditional sense) and therefore there need to be new ways to make this connection with the students. With the creation of a guide to gain authority for behavioural interventionists online there should be not only a quicker transition to the online platform but a savings of time, energy and money. This guide will be created with input from a group of behavioural interventionists sharing their experience with teaching online and describing techniques that proved to be more effective than others for addressing their students. This guide would be presented to the supervisors for an organization of behavioural interventionists and following approval would be published on a group forum.

**Authority Types and Importance**

 For many years the topic of classroom authority has been a subject of interest. With classroom settings switching to a more digital platform and classroom dynamics changing due to changing time and laws. Judith L. Pace and associates in the journal article “Classroom authority : theory, research, and practice” state that authority made in the classroom setting is essential for kids to do well in school as well as remain engaged with course content, especially for kids in kindergarten through grade 16 (Pace, XI). Authority has been defined in a multitude of ways but the essential idea is that it holds a certain “coercive power” (Pace, 2). The teacher has at their disposal four types of authority which are often used in tandem. The first of which is “traditional authority” which allows for a teacher to gain control based on the longstanding tradition that teachers hold positions of power and control over their students (Pace, 3). Second, “charismatic authority” relies on the teachers ability to inspire their students with their personal qualities (Pace, 3). Third is “legal-rational authority” which allows the teacher to gain control through the rights of a teacher such as control of grades or detention (Pace, 3). Finally, “professional authority” comes from the teachers breadth of knowledge about the subject which they teach. Once teachers are able to employ one, or more, of the types of authority in their classroom they are further able to educate the children that they work with. Each of these types of authority can be easily implemented online, with the exception of the possible hindering of the “charismatic authority” that can be harder to convey due to the limitations of a computer screen.

**Program Background**

Behavioural Interventionists use a specific teaching method when working with kids on the Autistic Spectrum to ensure the best behavioural results. Children on the Autistic spectrum often display deficiencies when engaging in social situations and therefore may need additional instruction to assist with their education. During lessons students and teachers engage in content that the child may be struggling with such as pronouns, pronunciation, requests, and motor skills depending on their age. A key aspect of this method of teaching is that no negatives are used. When the child gets the wrong answer instead of meeting them with a negative statement, “no” or “that is wrong,” instead the teacher is to repeat the statement and say the correct answer as to avoid any negative association. Correct answers are immediately met with positive reinforcement with a verbal statement, “yes, good job,” and intermittently spaced treats, a video or game. Each question answered is entered into a data sheet shared between the Behavioural Interventionist teaching the child to show progress that progress is being shown in a concrete way. To ensure the data is valid each Behavioural Interventionist must ask the question in a specific manner and obtain the child’s attention before. To ask these questions in a productive and correct way authority must be gained and maintained throughout the two hours sessions. Therefore, it is with this in mind that interviews and research into authority during lessons was carried out.

**Methods**

To collect data, interviews were conducted with each of the teachers in a Behavioural Interventionist division that were available as well as an interview with a Behavioural Consultant. The interviews will either be conducted over the phone or emailed the document to return within a week. The goal of these interviews is to identify common struggles the teachers have experienced, stemming from issues of establishing authority, as well as techniques they have found effective within each of their lessons. In addition to the information collected by the teachers personal antidotes from lessons will be incorporated into the guide. Advice from the training powerpoint will also be incorporated into the guide to ensure that program guidelines are met and reinforced.

**Data Section**

**Details of Behavioural Interventionists/Consultants Interviews.** The sample consisted of two Behavioural Interventionists and one Behavioural Consultant. The phone interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes and surveys were returned within two business days. All those interviewed had completed the mandatory training session for work as a Behavioural Interventionists before beginning their lessons with the child. Of those interviewed, two worked four hours with the child split into two sessions and the consultant touches bases with the families and the behavioural interventionists every one and a half weeks.

**Data Limitations.** Due to the small sample size large conclusions from this inquiry should not be made. While these interviews and guide contain general advice to gain and maintain authority during these lessons all Behavioural Interventionists were working with a specific client and cannot be applied to all situations and children. Therefore, this guide will only be added to the shared documents between Behavioural Interventionists and it is up to the discretion of the Behavioural Consultants as to whether it would be beneficial to other divisions of Behavioural Interventionists.

**Time Spent Gaining/Maintaining Attention.** Based on answers from the interviews, the amount of time spent on trying to keep the student engaged in the course work online depended greatly on the age and whether they were high or low functioning (Ando & Chen). Generally approximately half or the whole of the lesson was used trying to engage the child in the course content using various methods (Ando & Chen). For new Behavioural interventionists it is a particular struggle to maintain engagement and therefore it is suggested to implement more frequent breaks between questioning (Ando). These breaks should be filled with fun activities for the child whether that be a video containing the child's favorite media content or an online game (Ando). The last hours tends to be the most difficult in terms of maintaining attention and therefore more frequent and longer reinforcements should be used (Chen).

**Time Spent on Rewards.** Rewards are mini breaks that are implemented into every session. These breaks are used to help reinforce good behaviour and engage the child in content that is known to be preferred. The amount of time spent on rewards again depends on the child’s ability and the length of the lesson. At the same time the rewards that have such pull can be used left on as they draw all attention to the screen of the computer (Ruiz). As the session goes on more rewards must be used and have a higher level of appeal for the children (Ando). A new Behavioural Interventionist should reinforce every three to four questions whereas a more experienced Behavioural Interventionist can implement rewards every 10 to 15 minutes (Ando & Chen).

**Techniques used to express authority to maintain attention.** The biggest way to express one's authority is to use reinforcements to reward only good work (Ando & Chen). Rewards should not be given if the child is not compliant as it would allow them to have control of the session (Ando). If the child realizes that bad behaviour gets them rewards faster it creates even less productive lessons with the Behavioural Interventionist holding no authority (Chen). The Behavioural Interventionist must ensure that “no means no” or they will lose any power in the situation (Ando). If a child is particularly distracted with a toy the Behavioural Interventionist can allow the child to play with the toy for a limited time (Chen). This shows that the teacher has allowed them to play with the toy as a sort of reward but they are required to come back when the timer is up. The child is most times more willing to come back after they have had time to play with their distractions as well. As a new Behavioural Interventionist parents could assist by giving the child a treat after every lesson as to pair the Interventionist with the desired item (Ando). If the child is working for a reward the progress should be shown visually in some way, such as holding up fingers, to maintain authority while capturing their attention with more constant stimuli (Chen). The type of authority described in the above examples is “legal-rational authority” as the teacher holds the power of giving them rewards (Pace, 3). If the child (2-4 yrs old) is particularly young the main job of the Behavioural Interventionist is to act as more of a friend to play with while answering a couple questions, in this case authority would not be applicable (Ando). This last example relies the most on the “charismatic authority” of the teacher to inspire the child with their personality (Pace, 3).

**Techniques to keep course content engaging.** To keep course content engaging it is important to be constantly introducing more programs as to avoid repetition (Ando). Lessons should incorporate some of the child’s interests, such as their favorite animals or cartoons (Ando). If the child gets bored with questions the lessons should be woven into reading stories or the videos that they are watching (Ando & Chen). Questions can be asked by stuffed animals or puppets if the Behavioural Interventionist has them at their disposal as it draws more interest into the lesson (Chen). Each question should be met with something the child enjoys as to keep them engaged and wanting to do the lesson. Give the child a choice of the possible rewards that they can have or the lesson type that they may want to do next (Ando & Chen). This will keep the child engaged as they are choosing what they would like to do next, this gives them the appearance of choice during the lesson (Ando).

**Transitioning to teaching online in terms of authority.**  Most of the Behavioural Interventionists had the chance of teaching in person lessons before transitioning to the online platform (Ando & Chen). The in person sessions allowed them to establish a power dynamic that shifted over well to the online forum (Ando & Chen). For the new behavioural interventionist establishing a role of authority online it is important to spend the first couple lessons just playing games with the child (Ando). These lessons should last no longer than 30 minutes and once rapport is established course content can slowly be introduced (Ando). If the short sessions appear to be going well and the child remains engaged lessons should be increased by 30 minutes until lessons are 2 hours long (Ando). This slow progression should help the child adjust to the long time periods spent with the Behavioural Interventionist (Ando). For all Behavioural Interventionists it is recommended when moving lessons online to keep reward frequent and targeted to the child's interests to get them used to sessions on screen. Questions asked should also be easy for the child to answer to avoid associating lessons on the computer being hard and unenjoyable (Chen).

**Recommendations for new Behavioural Interventionist struggling with control.** New behavioural interventionists should learn to balance being “fun and strict at the same time” to show the student that lessons will be fun when instructions are followed (Chen). When the child follows instructions or gets questions right Behavioural Interventionists should follow with verbal praise so the child learns that they are a nice voice and will praise them for good behaviour (Chen). Ensure that as the lessons go on the child seems to have some sort of affinity for the Behavioural interventionist because children will not listen to people they don’t like (Ando). Always start with easy questions that the child will be able to answer so they will not be embarrassed and they will be immediately be met with praise which should help create a bond between the child and the Behavioural Interventionist (Ando). Any Behavioural Interventionist struggling to maintain attention online should revert to games, books, and videos until the child seems to be calm and attentive. Trying to gain control with a child who is not ready and willing to participate can take away any authority that the teacher may have because the child learns that they don’t have to listen (Ando). With the unique situation of online lessons the Behavioural Interventionist only power is that of online fun and once that is lost authority is very hard to gain and maintain. To avoid this ensure that videos and games are targeted for the child and that their attention and engagement are there before any questions are asked (Ando & Chen).

**Techniques for gaining authority online.** When asking questions it is important to incorporate questions from the lesson into conversations as opposed to asking them point blank (Ando & Chen). For each of the programs, Tact, Mand, and Motor can be turned into games that will interest children (especially the young children being taught) (Chen). Due to the fact that the course content is just being turned into a game it is still within program recommendations. Ensure that if the specific lesson is very long to switch between each of the tasks as to not be asking the same sort of questions for too long (Ando). This will help keep the program fresh and interesting instead of monotonous.

**Conclusion**

**Summary and Interpretation of Findings.** Children have been moving in high numbers to online classes for all age ranges. New teachers can find it difficult to gain authority online and some may have difficulty maintaining it. For Behavioural Interventionists new and old it can be a challenge to engage students and have control of a lesson through a screen. This has been expressed in the in person and online interviews through the experiences of behavioural interventionists and consultants over the years and with this specific client. Keeping course content fresh and targeted to the child is the best way to keep their attention on the screen. Frequent rewards and reinforcements are necessary to add an enjoyable aspect to the lesson and to ensure it remains that way, especially for young children. New Behavioural Interventionists to play with the child for the first couple 30 minute lessons to establish a rapport. Sessions should increase in 30 minute increments as the child and Interventionist gets acquainted until they are two hours length. When the Behavioural Interventionist is asking questions and running course content it is important the child is attentive and instructions are enforced before any praise or reward is given. While the role of the Behavioural Interventionist is to assist with the child's growth in any aspect that they need, this task proves impossible if there is no bond between the pair.

**Recommendations.**

**Guide for Behavioural Interventionist Teaching Online**

1. Ensuring during lessons that *“no means no”*
2. When instructions are followed good things come. (ie rewards, reinforcements)
3. Towards the end of the lesson more *powerful reinforcements* should be given to keep the lesson going as attention wanes. (ie. videos of their favorite cartoon)
4. Weaving lessons into conversations, stories, and videos can make course content infinitely more engaging and therefore making the child more willing to participate.
5. Framing questions in a positive manner and allowing the child to have some choice with the course content allows for the child to feel some level of control.
6. If the child feels as if they have chosen to participate in an activity they are more likely to follow through to the completion of the activity.
7. Reverting back to playing games when control is lost will help maintain the idea that lessons are fun.
8. Asking the parents for help by giving rewards at the end of lessons or helping them sit down and listen.
9. Switch the lessons up to keep the content new and fresh.
10. Ask different kinds of questions (different lessons) instead of repeating the same type of questions for too long.

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