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Daily Routines That Foster Success for Special Education Students

As professionals within the special education field, we know that a consistent and structured environment is paramount for fostering success for students with disabilities. But beyond the basic structure, the specific daily routines we implement can have a profound impact on student outcomes. These routines serve as an anchor, offering predictability and supporting students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral needs.

Whether you're a teacher, service provider, administrator, or counselor, understanding and implementing effective daily routines is a crucial part of creating an environment where special education students can thrive.

The Problem: Inconsistent or Unstructured Routines Can Hinder Student Progress

A lack of structure in the daily routine can lead to confusion, stress, and disengagement among special education students. Many students with disabilities, particularly those with autism, ADHD, or intellectual disabilities, benefit from routines that provide clarity and reduce anxiety. Research shows that routines and schedules are not just helpful—they're essential. For example, according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, students with autism often have difficulty adjusting to changes in their environment and may react negatively to disruptions. Without a

by: **Jaclyn Miranda**



Client Solutions Specialist
jaclyn.miranda@gosolutions.com
www.gosolutions.com

predictable routine, these students are more likely to experience challenges that affect their social, emotional, and academic progress.

In classrooms without clear routines, students may struggle to understand expectations, which can lead to frustration or behavioral outbursts. Teachers, in turn, may spend more time managing behaviors than delivering instructional content, reducing the time available for learning. This cycle can be particularly damaging in special education settings, where each student's unique needs must be addressed through individualized strategies.

The Solution: Implementing Structured Daily Routines

Implementing structured and predictable routines can be the key to unlocking student success. These routines should encompass all aspects of the school day, from the moment students enter the classroom until they leave. Below are some specific elements of daily routines that can help special education students succeed:

1. Visual Schedules and Timers:

A visual schedule, often paired with a timer, can provide students with a clear understanding of what to expect throughout the day. For students with autism or those with language processing delays, a visual schedule is particularly effective. Research from The National Autism Center emphasizes that visual supports help reduce anxiety and improve focus, as students can anticipate transitions and upcoming activities. A visual timer can also support time management skills by showing students how long they have for each task or activity.

For example, if a student is transitioning between activities like math and reading, a clear visual transition guide can help them understand the change, reducing potential frustration and increasing focus.

2. Consistent Routines for Transitions

Changes between activities or locations are often difficult for students with disabilities, especially those with sensory processing challenges or executive functioning difficulties. To address this, establish predictable transition routines. These routines should include clear verbal and visual cues and provide students with enough time to adjust. For instance, a routine could include a five-minute warning before the end of an activity, a brief countdown, or the use of specific songs or signals that indicate transitions are approaching. The goal is to minimize confusion and create a sense of stability for students.

3. Task Breakdown and Structured Support

Many students in special education benefit from tasks being broken down into smaller, manageable steps. This process, often referred to as "task analysis," can be paired with visual aids, checklists, or prompts that guide students through each step. For example, if a student is working on a writing assignment, they might follow a routine that includes:

- Step 1: Choose a topic
- Step 2: Write a sentence
- Step 3: Check for punctuation
- Step 4: Share with a peer

Breaking tasks into smaller parts provides students with clear goals and achievable steps, building their sense of competence and autonomy.

4. Incorporating Sensory Breaks:

Sensory processing issues can often interfere with a student's ability to remain focused during class activities. Scheduled sensory breaks throughout the day allow students to recharge, re-engage, and refocus. Research shows that sensory breaks improve concentration and reduce disruptive behaviors (Koenig, 2018). These breaks can involve activities such as stretching, using fidget tools, or brief walks around the classroom. Providing students with these breaks as part of a predictable routine ensures that they remain ready to participate in classroom activities.

5. Predictable Classroom Environment:

For many students with disabilities, the physical classroom environment can either support or hinder their success. A classroom that is organized, with clearly labeled materials and designated areas for different activities, provides students with a sense of order. Students should know where to find materials, where to sit, and where to go during different times of the day. Regularly reviewing and maintaining a clean, organized environment is essential for minimizing distractions and promoting focus.

Why These Solutions Work

These routines are effective because they provide students with the structure and predictability that they require to succeed. Special education students often face challenges related to attention, processing, and sensory regulation. Daily routines help manage these challenges by giving students a clear understanding of what to expect, reducing anxiety, and providing opportunities for active participation.

Additionally, routine offers the consistency needed for students to internalize skills and concepts. Through repeated, structured routines, students can develop key life skills, such as time management, communication, and social interactions. Research from *The Journal of Special Education* confirms that structured routines enhance learning outcomes and improve student engagement by fostering a sense of security and mastery.

Moreover, daily routines benefit the entire school ecosystem. Teachers spend less time managing transitions and behaviors, allowing them to focus on delivering high-quality instruction. Service providers, counselors, and other specialists can tailor interventions

more effectively when they understand the structure of a student's day, leading to greater coordination and better student outcomes.

Practical Example: A Typical Day with Structured Routines

Let's consider a classroom of elementary school students with various disabilities. The teacher begins the day by welcoming students with a familiar greeting and a visual schedule displayed on the board. Students know that the first activity will be a group read-aloud, followed by a short sensory break. A transition song is used to signal the upcoming change to the next activity.

During independent work time, students have a clear checklist of tasks they need to complete. They can check off each item as they finish, which provides them with a sense of accomplishment and direction. At the end of the day, there is a designated clean-up time followed by a calming activity to help students unwind before they leave for home.

This routine is consistent, predictable, and structured, helping each student understand what is expected of them while reducing stress and increasing engagement.

Routine as the Foundation for Success

Special education students thrive when they can rely on a predictable and supportive environment. By implementing consistent and structured daily routines, educators and service providers can create a classroom environment that fosters success. These routines not only provide emotional stability and reduce anxiety but also support cognitive growth, helping students reach their full potential. As professionals, we must embrace these strategies and make routine an integral part of our approach to teaching and supporting students with disabilities.

When applied thoughtfully and consistently, daily routines can unlock new opportunities for students, making them feel secure, capable, and ready to succeed.

About the Author:

Jaclyn Miranda is a Client Solutions Specialist at Go Solutions, where she focuses on consulting with clients to develop personalized strategies that address their unique challenges. Drawing on her background in education and behavioral health, she excels at offering insightful, tailored guidance to help clients optimize their operations and achieve their goals. Jaclyn's consultative approach is centered on building long-term relationships, ensuring that each solution is aligned with her clients' needs and contributes to their ongoing success.

