

Module: Structured Work Systems

Steps for Implementation: Structured Work Systems

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When planning for and implementing structured work systems and activity organization with children and youth with ASD, the following steps are recommended.

Step 1. Considering the Learner and the Environment

In Step 1, teachers/practitioners must complete a series of assessments to ensure that the appropriate work system is developed for individual learners.

1. Teachers/practitioners conduct an individualized assessment of learner needs to determine the learner's
 - a. reading ability,
 - b. ability to match colors, numbers, and/or shapes,
 - c. ability to move from one area of the environment to another with little or no adult support, and
 - d. ability to participate in organizing his/her work system each day (e.g., written checklist).
2. Teachers/practitioners determine whether a portable or stationary work system would be more appropriate for an individual learner by considering the learner's
 - a. need for predictability and routine and
 - b. schedule (e.g., moves from class to class, stays in one classroom).
3. Teachers/practitioners also should evaluate the learner's concept of "finished" by assessing the learner's ability to
 - a. place all items into a "finished" box/shelf on his/her right,
 - b. match visual symbols to corresponding task containers (the learner will be finished when all of the visual symbols are matched to the tasks), and
 - c. cross off each task from a list as the task is completed (the learner will be finished when all of the items are crossed off).

This information helps teachers/practitioners determine what type of work system is most appropriate for each student. The goal for students is to manipulate the work system independently, so proper assessment ensures that the work system developed will be meaningful for each student and allow for independent performance after the initial teaching phase. The format of the work system should allow the student to perform fluently on his/her own, so it is important to recognize that a more complex system is not "better" if the student cannot use it without adult support.

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4. After conducting assessments, teachers/practitioners should select one of the following work system formats:
 - a. *Left-to-right.* With this format, tasks are placed to the left of the student and the student completes them in any order. Finished tasks are placed in a clear location to the student's right. No sequencing or matching is required. This format is appropriate for learners who are not yet able to sequence activities, and would benefit from using a concrete location for "finished" (a basket or shelf). This format is also appropriate for students who need all of the required materials in close proximity, thus limiting mobility while working.
 - b. *Matching work system.* The learner matches visual symbols to containers holding tasks and completes them by following the sequenced visual cues. Sequencing and matching are required. This format is appropriate for learners who are able follow a sequence of directions and complete tasks in an assigned order. Students using a matching work system may or may not need to place items in a designated "finished" location. Placing the finished tasks back on the shelf (essentially "re-filing" them where they got them) may be appropriate. Students may be able to get up and get designated activities from nearby locations.
 - c. *Written list work system.* With this format, learners follow a list of written activities and complete them in order. Sequencing is required. This format is appropriate for learners who are able to read and comprehend basic directions (e.g. math folder, red box), as well as follow a sequenced set of written directives. Students using a written work system do not need a designated "finished" location and should be able to return the completed activity to the assigned location (e.g. place the worksheet back in the math folder and put the folder back in the desk). Students may be able to get up to get designated activities from locations around the classroom.

Step 2. Creating the Work System

In Step 2, teachers/practitioners begin developing materials for learners' work systems by completing the following tasks.

1. Teachers/practitioners complete a task analysis of the work system to identify all of the materials needed to create it including who will obtain and/or create each item.

It is important to remember that both the items to create the work system and the activities to place in the work system must be collected. Work system activities should offer opportunities to practice previously mastered skills, not to learn new skills or content. It is important to choose activities that the learner can already complete independently.

2. Teachers/practitioners arrange furniture in the independent work area by ensuring that:

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- a. the area is clearly defined (e.g., table-top divider is used, office space is set-up for the learner, visual cue indicates expectation),
 - b. furniture is arranged so that the learner can work left-to-right when appropriate,
 - c. a finished box is in place if appropriate, and
 - d. all extra materials, tasks, and distractions are removed or placed out of the learner's view.
3. Teachers/practitioners ensure that the tasks and activities used in the work system have been previously mastered.

It is important to choose activities that the learner already completes independently.

4. Teachers/practitioners arrange tasks/materials in the independent work area appropriately.
 - a. If a left-to-right work system is in place, learners' tasks are placed on their left.
 - b. If a matching work system is in place, learners' tasks/materials are placed in corresponding containers.
 - c. If a written work system is in place, learners' tasks/materials are in designated locations.
5. Teachers/practitioners ensure that a cue indicating the next activity is provided for learners (e.g., an object, picture, or word that gives the learner information about what activity he/she will participate in next).

Step 3. Teaching and Monitoring the Work System

In Step 3, teachers/practitioners teach the learner how to use the work system and monitoring learner progress. This is accomplished by completing the following tasks.

1. Teachers/practitioners establish periods of the day when the learner practices previously mastered skill independently during "Independent Work Time."

The number and length of independent work sessions should match the learner's age and developmental level (e.g., high school students should spend more of the day working independently than preschool students).

2. Teachers/practitioners transition the learner to the independent work area.
3. Teachers/practitioners teach the learner how to use the independent work system by:
 - a. standing behind the learner during work sessions to provide prompts if needed,
 - b. providing the most minimally intrusive prompts possible (e.g., primarily non-verbal prompts),

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- c. providing prompts that relate primarily to the use of the work system components (e.g., moving task from the shelf to the desk, matching a visual system, crossing off a finished item), and
- d. fading prompts as quickly as possible.

Examples of strategies that can be used to teach learners how to use the work system include video modeling, prompting, and chaining.

4. As the learner becomes more proficient at using the system, teachers/practitioners do not provide regular prompting.
5. Teachers/practitioners supervise the learner's use of the independent work system.

The teacher/practitioner may be working with other learners while overseeing the learner using the independent work system.

6. Teachers/practitioners review the learner's work for accuracy when the learner is finished.

Staff should assess the finished work by reviewing the tasks placed in the designated finished location (e.g. finished box, baskets, folders, box on teacher's desk) and checking for errors. Some work systems may include a time at the end of the work session for teachers/practitioners to review the completed tasks before the student moves on the next activity (e.g. a visual support at the end of the work system may cue a student to raise his/her hand for the teacher to check the work).

7. Teachers/practitioners provide feedback to the learner at designated times about work performance, if appropriate.

Teachers/practitioners should determine if the learner's errors require additional teaching or if errors are an anomaly. If additional teaching is required, tasks should not be placed in the independent work system until the skill is re-taught.

8. Teachers/practitioners use a data collection system to record learner behavior during independent work and performance on assigned tasks.
9. Teachers/practitioners use a "task-tracking" system to ensure that tasks are rotated frequently and that newly mastered tasks are regularly introduced during independent work time.