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What is This?
Goal Setting and Self-Monitoring for Students With Disabilities

Practical Tips and Ideas for Teachers

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This article provides teachers with practical tips and ideas about how self-monitoring works in conjunction with goal-setting strategies to support students to set and achieve different types of academic goals. In addition, specific examples of academic goals and self-monitoring forms are provided to give teachers an example of such goals. To provide teachers with practitioner-oriented information about how to use these strategies, practical tips and ideas are addressed in the following sequence: (a) how to support students to set school-related goals, (b) how to support students to develop action plans for student-set target goals, (c) how to create a self-monitoring sheet that matches the self-set goals, and (d) how to evaluate the targeted goal.

Keywords: access to general education; curriculum; strategies; instruction

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) introduced requirements to ensure all students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. The 2004 amendments to IDEA (2004) expanded and strengthened the requirement that students with disabilities should receive special education, supplementary aids, and related services that enable students to be involved with and progress in the general education curriculum. To enable educators to meet this federal mandate, evidence-based strategies are needed, which promote such access and progress (Collins & Salzberg, 2005; Paulsen, 2005). Student-directed learning strategies (e.g., goal setting, self-monitoring, and problem solving) are evidence-based strategies that can be used as curriculum augmentations to teach students skills to achieve greater access to the general education curriculum (Agran, Cavin, Wehmeyer, & Palmer, 2006; Lee et al., 2006; Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gibson, & Agran, 2004; Wehmeyer, Yeager, Bolding, Agran, & Hughes, 2003).

Goal setting and self-monitoring, considered to be the first two steps for self-regulated performance (Agran, 1997), are widely implemented and validate student-directed learning strategies that have the potential to enhance access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. The third step of self-regulated performance involves self-evaluation. As self-directed learning strategies, one of the benefits of instruction in
goal setting and self-monitoring is the generalization of learning and skills (Agran, King-Sears, Wehmeyer, & Copeland, 2003; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Goal setting includes creating a target or plan for what one wants to accomplish or achieve (Sands & Doll, 2000). Instruction to promote goal setting and attainment skills can provide a means for students to determine an academic-related goal that can be derived from the general education curriculum. Studies of goal setting interventions have found that goal setting has a positive impact on the academic performance of students with disabilities across a variety of academic domains, including writing, reading, and math (Graham, MacArthur, Schwartz, & Page-Voth, 1992; Johnson, Graham, & Harris, 1997; Page-Voth & Graham, 1999; Schunk, 1985; Troia & Graham, 2002).

Self-monitoring is a procedure that actively engages a person in self-observing and self-recording occurrences of target behavior, such as those that are part of a goal (Agran, 1997; Wehmeyer et al., 1998). Students must be able to discriminate whether or not a target behavior has occurred, realizing through self-observation that the activity has taken place and then record the occurrence. Self-monitoring strategies have also been widely used among students with disabilities across multiple content-related tasks, such as reading comprehension, writing, and on-task behavior in the classroom. These strategies have been used across disability categories as well, including students with intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ([ADD/ADHD] Jitendra, Hoppes, & Xin, 2000; Sexton, Harris, & Graham, 1998; Shimabukuro, Prater, Jenkins, & Edelen-Smith, 1999).

Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, and Little (2008) provided instructional support to 20 high school students with disabilities to set academic goals in core classes (e.g., English, math, social studies, and science) and self-monitor progress on the goals. With instruction using the self-determined learning model of instruction ([SDLMI] Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug & Martin, 2000) implemented by the special education teacher, each student (a) set a goal linked to the general education curriculum, (b) created an action plan to achieve that goal, and (c) monitored his or her progress toward goal attainment. The participating students attained the targeted academic goals at or above the mean level of performance. According to the students’ self-reports of their involvement in the process, additional benefits of goal setting and self-monitoring included (a) becoming more organized, (b) experiencing less stress over assignment completion, (c) being more confident, (d) participating more, (e) tracking work, (f) understanding assignments better, and (g) using better study habits at home. In addition to the students’ self-reports of satisfaction, most teachers reported that self-monitoring sheets were useful in helping their students stay focused on their goals.

Supporting Students to Set Academic Goals

In many cases, student-directed learning strategies are taught in conjunction with one another to form a multi-component intervention. Linking instruction in goal setting and self-monitoring forms a potentially effective intervention to enable students to reach their academic goals. As mentioned earlier, the SDLMI used by Lee et al. (2008) showed the effect of linking goal setting and self-monitoring on gaining greater access. This model follows the basic steps for self-management described earlier: setting a goal, developing a plan including self-monitoring, and then evaluating the plan (Agran, 1997). But there are a number of methods for setting goals that could also be used (Halpern et al., 1997; Martin & Marshall, 1995). In addition to the use of self-monitoring, teachers using the SDLMI can also implement self-scheduling, self-instruction, problem-solving instruction, decision-making instruction, self-advocacy and assertiveness training, and communication skills training as educational supports for students. Academic goals that students can set are also diverse. For example, the academic goals identified by high school students who participated in the Lee et al. study addressed the following primary functions: (a) improving grades or academic skills, (b) improving organization skills, and (c) improving social interactions. The goals for improving academic skills include improving reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, note taking, and locating answers in a study guide. Goals related to improving organization skills, most frequently set by students, include goals related to work completion, completing assignments, and turning in classwork or assignments on time. A goal for improving social interaction includes improving interaction with peers in a class.

Teachers can begin the goal-setting process by talking with students in a large or small group environment to address the idea of setting a goal about something that the students want or need to do. At first, teachers must be more actively involved with students in setting goals. Over time and with repeated practice, students become better at setting goals. Teachers can set the scene for goals by setting up the scope and length of goals. For example, an English teacher can mention that the class will be setting individual goals related to completing a series of short stories and related activities. The first goal will last 2 weeks, and students can determine what they will individually need to work on and what supports are needed for them to complete the assignment.
Developing Action Plans for Goals

Action plans are the next step in the goal-setting process. These plans are the link between goal setting and self-monitoring. Once a student sets a goal, he or she needs to develop a plan to meet the goal so that the self-monitoring process can be implemented to support goal completion. Teachers should talk with students who have set goals and discuss how they wish to work on the goal and when it will be accomplished. In essence, the action plan involves what will be done to achieve the goal. Using the SDLMI, a series of questions follow a problem-solving prompt. The plan is then implemented by thinking about (a) what actions to take to learn the new skill or accomplish the task, (b) what might get in the way, (c) how to remove the barriers mentioned, and (d) when the plan will start. The action that a student might take to remove the barriers (e.g., having time to study, remembering to turn in assignments) can be worked on using self-monitoring.

Creating a Self-Monitoring Sheet to Match Goals and Plans

To encourage students to keep working on their goals and action plans, it is important that students monitor and evaluate their action plan and their progress toward the goal. Self-monitoring sheets are easily developed to help students monitor their action plan. Because students must be able to discriminate the desired (or target) behavior that occurred and record its occurrence, a well-designed self-monitoring sheet is essential. Figure 1 presents a completed example of student response on a self-monitoring sheet for improving grades. Figure 2 and Figure 3 are blank self-monitoring forms for improving specific academic skills and organization skills, respectively.

General Tips for Discriminating and Recording the Targeted Goals and Action Plans

Self-monitoring is designed to call attention to an element in the student’s study plan that needs to be accomplished. First of all, teachers can work with students to write a clear statement about the targeted goals, action items, or activity steps to achieve the goal, and measures of goal attainment on the self-monitoring sheet. This prompts students to remember their goals, action plans, and measures (i.e., I will study vocabulary and reading comprehension for at least 30 minutes every day to improve my grade in English class). Use first-person statements and questions on the self-monitoring sheet (i.e., Did I work on a study guide?). Self-monitoring sheets should be designed to be applied for a relatively short duration (i.e., a week) so that students can check their work progress more often as well as obtain more frequent reinforcement from teachers and themselves about their efforts toward their goals.

As self-monitoring sheets are designed, teachers need to make sure that students know exactly what is expected of them. For example, a self-monitoring form that charts the study of vocabulary words should be explained to the student. This student would need to record the starting and ending time for study using a clock and indicate the closest number of minutes on the sheet. Teachers should encourage students to use self-monitoring sheets every day, regardless of the opportunity to work on targeted goals. This will enable students to form habits to use the self-monitoring sheet on a daily basis (i.e., Did I use my study guide to work on reading? Options for answer: “Mark either YES or NO”).

In addition to recording targeted goals and actions, teachers can include questions that encourage students to self-evaluate their satisfaction with their efforts toward goals (i.e., How did my studying work today? Students could mark one of the following three options: Great, I learned a lot; Okay; Not so Good). Also, include questions that prompt students to revisit their work progress during a given week and think about what they need to do better during the next week (e.g., Did I satisfy my efforts for my study plan this week?; If I am not satisfied, what do I need to do to be better next week?). A space for teacher comments about the students’ work on self-monitoring sheets provides students with teacher encouragement, concerns, or feedback pertaining to their work. Also, self-monitoring supports the use of a formal evaluation tool by including measures related to goal attainment level such as goal attainment scaling (Kiresuk, Smith, & Cardillo, 1994), a rubric designed to measure goal achievement.

Additional Tips for Different Types of Academic Goals

In addition to these general tips, specific suggestions need to be considered, depending on different types of academic goals and action plans for those different types
of goals. When a student sets a goal to improve grades, based on students’ current capacity, set reasonable timelines for reaching the target goals and identify a minimum number of times in a week that students should study or work on objectives on the self-monitoring sheet. Then show visual progress at the end of each week by connecting each dot (representing a day) marked on a self-monitoring sheet for a visual record of whether progress has been consistent (see Figure 1). In conjunction with the use of a self-monitoring sheet, be sure to let students know about overall grade progress regularly (e.g., scores on quizzes, tests, or class assignments). If seeking to improve specific academic skills, teachers should provide instruction designed to focus on specific skills needed for goal completion. Rather than assuming that a student knows how to do the activity, teachers and students can review together exactly what the self-monitoring sheets are measuring and what the skills needed involve. As criteria to evaluate goals, decide on a reasonable number of times to set aside for studying each week (e.g., work on study guide at least three times a week). Students can briefly write down on the self-monitoring sheet what they want to accomplish so that they can visually track skills on which they were working (i.e., the number of questions completed independently, keywords, number of correct answers) to track their work and progress (see Figure 2). Students may also need support to improve organizational skills. In this case, teachers can help students work through each step that is necessary to complete and turn in on-time assignments (see Figure 3). In addition, set a reasonable time for students to complete and turn in assignments. Also, encourage students to take notes about their assignments on the self-monitoring sheet so that their study information is available in a single location.

### Evaluating Targeted Goals and Adjusting Goals or Plans

After students work on their target goal using self-monitoring sheets designed to match their target goals and action plans, the student–teacher team can evaluate
whether the goal was achieved based on the goal statement. The way to measure or evaluate academic goals can be different, depending on types of academic goals. For example, to evaluate goals related to improving grades, the following measures can be used: (a) the number of minutes of studying or working, (b) the percentage of grade increase, or (c) time spent taking notes. For the goals related to improving specific skills, there are multiple ways to evaluate goals, depending on practiced skills such as average rate of completion: (a) number of correct answers to questions completed in a written assignment, (b) rate of agreement on key points with support person, (c) degree of satisfaction about taking notes, and (d) quiz or test scores. To evaluate goals for improving organization skills, the following measures are useful: (a) time working on assignment notes, (b) the percentage of increase in grades, (c) the number of times spent working on assignments, (d) the number of times assignments are turned in on time, or (e) the degree of satisfaction about work completion and management.

Along with evaluating goal attainment, it is important to adjust the targeted goals or action plans as needed, depending on students’ reactions and progress. In general, the process of goal setting and self-monitoring makes students more aware of what they need to be working on and thus makes them more likely to achieve their stated goal. In the case where students are not following the action plan for a goal, there are several things that a teacher can do to get the process back on track. For one, a teacher can review the goal with the student, making sure the goal is clear. In other words, students should visualize the goal completion and then review the steps in the action plan as well as the self-monitoring suggestions. Next, a teacher can build in reinforcement to support goal completion. Self-reinforcement is particularly helpful to keep students on track with the current and even future self-management of tasks. For example, if a student completes tasks listed on a self-monitoring sheet, teachers can provide reinforcement in the form of extra credit. For some students, a tangible reward is preferred. A good
source of information on self-reinforcement is contained in the Teachers’ Guides to Inclusive Practices: Student-Directed Learning (Agran et al., 2003). In the event that the student still is not making progress, the teacher and student should re-examine the goal to see if it is still a good target and look at the action plan to see if it is still relevant. To adjust goals or plans, teachers are encouraged to check goals on a weekly basis. Teacher comments can provide prompts and meaningful feedback to the students, which provide future reference related to adjusting goals or plans. Teachers and support staff should be sure to talk with students to determine what is getting in the way of their progress and try to adjust expectations or instruction to support their needs.

**Conclusion**

A combination of academic goals and self-monitoring sheets can be used as an instructional strategy to enhance access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. In addition, through the process of working on goals using self-monitoring, students become more involved in their educational activities. The suggested tips, ideas, and examples about how to use goal setting using self-monitoring may help teachers enhance student access to the general education curriculum by meeting their individual needs based on different targeted academic goals.

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