

Positive Intervention Assignment (PIA)

Using Task Analysis and Praise to Promote On-Task Behavior

By Maayan Dietka

I. Introduction

“Julie” is 15 years old and has multiple learning disabilities. At the start of her academic career, Julie attended a public school where she was placed in a special education class. However, her parents felt that she was not thriving in this setting and, a few years ago, transferred her to a local Yeshiva. Julie currently attends the eighth grade in her school, but she is severely lagging behind her class even at this grade. She is only able to read at the second grade level and has difficulties with simple numerical computations.

The school that Julie attends does not have the resources that Julie requires in order to progress. Members of the school have, on numerous occasions, advised Julie’s parents that their daughter should be transferred to a specialized school. However, Julie’s parents insist that she is much happier now than she was in the public school setting, and that, though she is not making academic gains, the social gains that she is making are too valuable to throw away.

I have been hired as a private tutor for Julie. I work with her in her own home for two hours every Sunday. Clearly, this is not a lot of time and every second is valuable. One of the greatest struggles in working with Julie is getting her to remain focused and on-task for two hours. Another big struggle is that Julie does not complete (or, often, does not even attempt) any work that her classroom teachers or I assign to her as

homework. Further, because she is unable to keep up with the pace in her classroom, Julie daydreams or simply “tunes out” when she is in class. She has learned over the last few years that there are no real requirements of her, or penalties for not participating or completing her work. Consequently, the only time that Julie really does any work is during the two hours that I spend with her.

II. Goal

The first goal that I set for Julie is for her to remain focused during the two hours that I spend with her. Some of the behaviors that I am looking to reduce or eliminate are daydreaming, playing with objects, leaning her head on her arm, staring blankly when asked a question, taking too long to begin a task and telling stories that are unrelated to the task. If Julie can remain on task for more of the time that we spend together, she will be able to make much greater gains from this time.

The second goal was to get Julie to complete the assignments that I give her when I am not there to monitor her. This is particularly important because if Julie actually completes the assignments, then she is spending more than merely two hours per week practicing valuable concepts.

III. Intervention

The main intervention strategy that I used with Julie was task analysis. The reasoning behind this is that breaking down the assignment into its smallest parts keeps Julie’s goals attainable—she can actually see the end result of each step. This is very important for Julie because if the task at hand is too complicated or has too many steps, she gets lost and resigns to staring at me blankly. She simply doesn’t know where to begin. Additionally, having multiple steps gives me, the instructor, more opportunities to

offer praise. If Julie knows what to do and gets praised for it when she does it, then the chances that she will remember to do it again are much higher.

I implemented this strategy when I introduced the concept of equations. After working with some manipulatives to get her to understand the grand concept, we spent approximately 15 minutes working on one problem. We wrote out all the steps that have to be done, from looking at the visual setup, writing down the problem, drawing a line by the equal sign to separate the sides of the equation, and the different operations you have to do to solve the problem. Next, I set up a new equation using the same manipulatives that we used earlier, and had Julie complete the problem the same way we did before. Every time that she completed a step correctly, I praised her by using the exact words from the rules that we wrote out. One example of this is “good job, Julie, you remembered to draw the line on the equal sign before going on to the next step.” If she forgot a certain step, I would cue her to look back at the steps we wrote out to make sure that she didn’t skip one. Once she corrected her mistake, I would praise her for it.

After we practiced the new concepts of the day, I showed Julie the assignment that I wanted her to complete over the course of the week. I explained the assignment to her in the same step-by-step way that we worked with earlier. We spent some time making a checklist of all the things that she would need to do in order to complete the assignment in time for our next meeting. Before I left, I praised Julie again for the wonderful work that she did and the way she followed the steps so well. I encouraged her by saying that I can’t wait to see how she will complete her homework assignment equally well.

IV. Results

Julie responded very well to this intervention plan. While we were working together, she would consistently look back and forth at her list of steps, making sure not to miss one. She was very engaged with the list that we made, and wanted to prove that she can do the whole thing without any help. Once this strategy was implemented, the blank stares that I usually get from Julie were completely eliminated, as well as other behaviors such as leaning on her arm, putting her head down or playing with her pencil or eraser. I still saw her daydreaming, but these occurrences were infrequent (once or twice compared to many times before intervention) and asking Julie what step needs to be done next got her fully engaged in the task again. She did not take numerous minutes to re-engage. However, on the occasions when Julie did need to be re-directed to her work, she was not able to continue where she left off. She always needed to go through the list of steps, looking to see what she did already before she can continue, even if I explicitly told her that she was working on step 3. In light of everything, though, this seems to be only a small drawback, especially since Julie was able to complete the problems. Also, when I came back the following week, Julie completed the assignment that I gave her! This has been the first time that Julie did ALL of the work that I assigned to her for homework. I was so proud of her!

V. Analysis

The initial goals were to get Julie to stay on task for two full hours and to complete her homework assignments. The idea behind using task analysis was to break the task into small pieces that would be tangible to Julie. I believe that this had such a great effect because, for the first time, Julie was presented with a task that she actually knew how to do. She was able to remain on task because she was *really* engaged in it.

She was not just watching me do it, she actually understood *what* I was doing and was able to do it herself. The following week, I started doing 2-step equations with Julie. Her initial response when she saw the problem was that “this is too hard.” However, after I showed her that it can be broken down into steps exactly like the problems she did last week, the new concept “clicked” for her, and she impressed me so much with how fast she picked up the new material. She was doing the two-step equations on her own after doing only two problems together.

Another major component of the intervention was the constant praise that I gave to Julie. Julie’s current classroom situation means that she is sitting in a class everyday that she simply cannot keep up with. As a result of not keeping up with her class and her teachers, Julie never receives any praise. She does not know the feeling of answering a question correctly because she is never alert or quick enough in class to answer the teacher’s question. This reality has broken down her motivation and self esteem. Why should she stay alert in class if she will never get recognized for her efforts? I also think that the encouragement that I gave to Julie at the end of our session gave her some accountability for her work. Julie’s teachers have never had any real expectations for her, and she has never had any consequences for not completing an assignment. In this case, however, I had demonstrated to Julie that I do believe in her and her abilities. She had to prove to me that I was right so that I would not be disappointed in her. I believe that creating accountability in this manner is setting up a foundation for rebuilding Julie’s motivation and self-esteem.

The technique of task-analysis has been very easy to implement in math. In the few weeks since I started this intervention, I have used this technique in all of the math

lessons that I do with Julie. However, my goal is to adapt this technique to other subjects as well, particularly reading.