Understanding Stalking Behavior by Individuals with ASD

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To provide an overview of stalking behavior in school and employment settings for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and to suggest possible intervention strategies.
What is Stalking?

- Stalking is a continuum that can range from harassment to threatening behavior to assault and homicide (Snow, 1998).
- It is often a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior (e.g., sending flowers to someone at work may be interpreted differently by the receiver depending upon their own intentions and assessment of the context).
There are three main elements of a stalking crime (Proctor, 2003).

a) harassment - repetitive annoying and disturbing behavior directed towards a person that has no positive or legitimate reason other than to harm the person,

b) a credible threat - a threat toward a person that causes the person to become fearful of their safety or causes emotional distress, and

c) a course of conduct - a series of acts over time towards a person that causes emotional stress and/or concern with safety.
Certain characteristics have been identified as putting an individual with (ASD) at risk for stalking in both these settings and strategies should be addressed in the school curriculum and the workplace setting. Individuals with ASD have problems with Theory of Mind, they may engage in inappropriate romantic and/or sexual behavior (sometimes identified as intimacy seekers or incompetent suitors in the stalking literature) and have criminal charges of stalking brought against them. Though the prevalence of stalking behaviors among individuals with ASD is not known, it could be increasing as individuals with ASD are increasingly served in inclusive school and work settings.
Characteristics

- One such characteristic is the inability to interpret correctly interpersonal cues signaling contact with a person as unwanted along with an obsessive focus on the desired person.

- In addition, the characteristic to ignore consequences, whether they are of a social or of legal nature, puts them at risk (Haskins & Silva, 2006).
Stokes, Newton and Kaur, (2007) identified barriers to successful romantic functioning:

- difficulty making small talk, not understanding the concept of a girlfriend or boyfriend, lack of empathy, lack of understanding in social contexts, and/or difficulty reading social cues.
- It was also reported that parents of individuals with ASD felt their children’s romantic/sexual behaviors were misunderstood.
Individuals with ASD pursued a romantic interest longer than typical when there was no response or a negative reaction from the other person.

Parents reported that it was difficult for their child with ASD to know when to stop contact.

The child’s lack of understanding as to why there was no reciprocity and their feeling that they were doing nothing wrong maintained the unwanted pursuit.

A significant predictor of successful romantic interaction in the Stokes et al. (2007) study was the extent to which social skills were learned from non-disabled peers. This indicates how important peer education from non-disabled peers is in teaching social skill intervention in this area.
Students with ASD are protected under both federal and most state laws as students with disabilities. The protections vary depending on the degree of disability of the student. The federal laws that set out to protect students with disabilities in the school setting are the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and their corresponding regulations.
ASD and IDEA

- Children with ASD often qualify for an IEP under IDEA. ASD is a qualifying category under the IDEA but the child must also require specialized instruction in some area in order to qualify for an IEP.
- Behavior and social skills issues that impede learning can be qualifying factors for an IEP.
One of the special factors to be considered by the IEP team is whether or not the child’s behavior impedes the child’s ability to learn or interferes with his peers’ ability to learn. If the IEP team determines that the child’s behavior impedes learning, then the team should consider the use of positive behavior interventions, strategies or supports. 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(3)(B)(i).
3 Steps to Interventions for Stalking

- Determining why the stalking occurs – The function of the stalking behavior and develop a positive behavior intervention plan based upon the function.
- Teach replacement behaviors – social skills, perspective taking, pragmatics, and conversational skills
- Address restricted interests, obsessions and preoccupations.
Structured interviews with the individual, teachers, support staff, campus security, parents, co-workers, etc.

Direct observation in the natural setting – track antecedents, triggers, behaviors used, skill needs, consequences of actions.

Meloy & Gothard (1995) 12% of the offenders with “mental disorders” were motivated due to social incompetence.

“incompetent stalkers” displayed loneliness, lack of social skills, and obsessional characteristics similar to those with ASD.
What is the Function for those with Social Incompetence?

- Gain access to a person
- Seeking attention or a relationship with the person
- But lacks the social competence to form a relationship or unable to recognize other does not reciprocate.
- Motivated by revenge for rejection of relationship
- OR due to lack of perspective taking, it can be perceived rejection.
Addressing Skill deficits- Replacement Behaviors

* Match Intervention to determined function
  * If seeking a relationship than teach the skills needed for relationship building
  * If the motive is revenge than teach the coping skills for dealing with rejection.
  * Basic skills include: conversational exchanges, reading body language, simultaneous facial, body and situational cues.
  * More complex skills of: perception of others feelings, recognize wanted & unwanted behavior, accepting rejection, next steps after rejection, vocabulary of relationships.
Complex skills Needed (Continued)

- Vocabulary for intimacy,
- Distinguish between acquaintances and friends
- Understanding social rules and norms for approaching individuals
- Laws governing stalking behavior
Typical teenagers and young adults acquire social knowledge from peers and friends.

People with ASD learn through family and observation.

Social learning through friends and peers is predictive of social functioning.

Family and observational learning has a negative impact.

Importantly, peers are more important to learning appropriate social skills than family. PEERS must be a part of the intervention plan.
Social Skill Groups

- Typical peer involvement in instruction and group process
- Commercially available curriculums
- Target skills for outside of group time
- Same skills prompted and supported by peers in school, work and community. Continue to reinforce the appropriate behaviors.
Interventions for Social Skills: Video Modeling

* Commercially available (e.g., Activity trainer) and individualized (can be made in minutes with iPod touch/ipad and Pictello)
* Use to teach conversational skills, comments, initiation, gestures, facial expressions, subtle skills, perspective taking, recognizing unwanted behaviors, appropriate responses to rejection.

* How Is It Done?
* Create multiple examples of the target response
* Focus on the relevant details for making discriminations
* Create using highly arousing voices (game show host)
* Provide opportunities to perform the skill.
Self-Management Strategies

- Use for individuals that need self regulation and monitoring of their own behaviors across environments.
- Useful in inclusion, worksites, community
- Checklists or set of rules where the individual learns to self-reinforce and monitor after training with an adult.
- Pivotal skills with wide-reaching changes across environments. Shifts responsibility from an adult to the individual to manage their own behavior.
Self-Management Combined with Video Feedback

- VFB different than VM in that the individual and an adult preview actual footage of the individual's behavior.
- Student learns to assess his/her own behavior.
- Recognize which behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate combine with self-monitoring and self-reinforcement (based upon function = earn opportunities with peers).
Scripts are written step-by-step comments and statements that include initiations, maintenance and ending statements.

Social Stories™ are used to share accurate information to handle social situations with attention to other’s perspectives. Often used in packages with above procedures. Can use with Pictello or Storeies2learn

Rules – Written, pictorial, auditory, visual reminders on the iPod touch. Social distances, checklists for friend or acquaintance. “If I want the girls to like me, I will walk with them only after they invite me.”
Beyond Obsessions and Restricted Areas of Interests
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- Alternative behaviors need to be developed and reinforced to replace obsessions.
- Access to new activities and interests through inclusion, teams and clubs paired with anxiety reduction techniques.
- Limit access to obsessions by using obsessions as reinforcers. Premack Principle
- Use rules around obsessions, self-management strategies.
Expertise in ASD
Clarify, misinterpretations of events, “unfair” rules.
Coping and compensatory skills based upon cognitive behavioral practices: 3 steps
  * Recognition of triggers for anger or anxiety
  * Teach self-calming skills
  * Self-management
Successfully Navigating the Workplace

- Educate yourself:
  - Read the Employee Handbook
  - Seek out supervisor for explanations if you do not understand guidelines
  - If available, take advantage of a company’s mentor program
  - Identify your own behaviors that might be in the definition of stalking
Navigating the Workplace

* Take seriously complaints against you for your behavior
* Work with your supervisor and the Human Resource Manager to resolve conflicts
* If you are warned against stalking, seek out a counselor to help reduce anxiousness
* If you are accused of workplace stalking, seek legal advice
Navigating the Workplace

* If accused, involve those that know you well to provide a comprehensive picture of you to help the supervisor assess the motive for your conduct.

* Seek out and work with a Disability Support Service which can provide mediators/advocates who can help problem solve difficult situations.
Extreme Obsessions can lead to criminal offense. Learn strategies to divert constant focus on others:

- Change your workspace away from a target person
- Change your focus to a different interest
- Use a prompt sheet as a reminder to return to work
- Set time limits on interactions with others. Adjust the time to be similar to other employees interactions.
- Learn the appropriate times, places and situations acceptable for interactions.
Navigating the Workplace

* Request a safe place (empty office, quiet staff lounge) to go to manage your anxiety and calm down
* Explore telecommuting options for working at home
* Request accommodations that tailor the work setting to your needs (office location, modes of communication, time of meetings, advance notice for group presentations, etc.)
How Employers can Provide Support

- Post a code of conduct and expect all employees to model acceptable social skills
- Provide a job coach to help a worker with ASD recognize social cues
- Acknowledge and reward acceptable behavior
- Use training videos and role play to demonstrate to employees acceptable behavior
- Educate employees in disability sensitivity and how to work with an individual with ASD
How Employers can Provide Support

* Provide a mentor to new employees and continue to have mentors available
* Make social event attendance optional
* Encourage employees to have conversations away from work areas
* Allow employees to use alternative forms of communication (emails, texting, instant messaging, etc).
How Employers can Provide Support

- Provide for employees to work at home
- Adjust location and mode for meetings to meet the needs of the employee (phone, computer conference, time, place, etc.)
- Provide advance notice for group presentations
  Provide options for an employee responding to a discipline meeting (written as opposed to meeting in person) and allow for individual to bring an advocate.
Raise public awareness, in both school and work settings, of the characteristics of individuals with ASD in order to:

* increase an understanding of their social needs, provide necessary intervention strategies
* avoid misinterpretation of “stalking like” behaviors that may lead to social exclusion and involvement in the criminal justice system for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders.