A Review of The Tough Kid On-Task in a Box

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When K. Daniel O’Leary (1980) asked the simple question, which is more beneficial for children, pills or skills, he would sound an alarm that would motivate behavioral researchers to search out effective programs that could serve as reasonable alternatives to the rush to medical intervention? Thirty-five years later, despite decades of well-documented behavioral research into effective interventions, we appear no closer to resolving this question than we were when O’Leary postulated it. Although behavior therapy is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, evidence suggests a lack within the medical community of recommended psychological options (Visser et al. 2015). As noted by Visser et al., as of 2015, 43 % of the 6.4 million children diagnosed with ADHD are currently treated with medication, as compared with 13 % of those diagnosed with ADHD being treated with behavior therapy.

We might ask ourselves why, with guarded sentiment directed towards medicating children, is the common route to treating the most severe symptoms of ADHD still so squarely in the medical realm? As operators within the common human species, educators and practitioners find themselves governed by many of the same contingencies impacting their clients and students. Behavior often takes the easiest and least intrusive path towards the desired outcome. When the expectation is to build an effective intervention for a very tough child with a shortage of resources available, the medical intervention might be seen as the path of least resistance. However, within this process, the attainment of critical skills might be overlooked. The need for user-friendly behavioral options

for teachers and other providers of educational programs for school-age children is still apparent.

Jenson and a variety of colleagues have made it a focus to provide practitioners with easy-to-use tools designed to be helpful across a variety of settings to effectively remediate problems encountered by those working with children having very challenging behavior problems. We will review the most recent addition to the *Tough Kid* compendium, *On-Task in a Box*.

Program Rationale

The Tough Kid On-Task in a Box (Jensen and Sprick 2014) is presented in an easy-to-understand format, is designed for immediate implementation within the school setting, and can be used with an individual student, two students, or with an entire class. It is set up in four sections each with multiple subsections describing specific uses and activities. *On-Task in a Box* is designed to be a comprehensive evidence-based intervention kit providing on-task training through a behavior intervention program for school-aged children meeting thresholds for frequency of off-task behaviors in the classroom setting. *On-Task in a Box* utilizes self-monitoring and self-graphing, peer modeling with optional self-modeling, frequent positive reinforcement, and a reward system for meeting goals. The intervention presented in the facilitator’s manual is organized into four sections: A “program overview” that outlines the importance of on-task behavior, a “Does it Work?” section that provides an empirical basis for the approach, an “Implementation With Individuals or Buddies” section that is a start to finish overview of utilizing the kit, and an “Implementation With a Whole Class” section that serves as an overarching descriptor of a class-wide application process. *On-Task in a Box* also includes six appendices that provide

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illustrated explanations of materials included in the kit as well as step-by-step implementation outlines of procedures.

Program Overview

The authors build off of a platform that emphasizes the long-term advantages of attention and its relationship with achievement using well-tested examples from similar populations (i.e., Clare 1992; Greenwood, Harton, & Utley, 2002). Clearly emphasized in this section are the benefits of being on-task, the population best suited for the intervention, the individuals who should facilitate the intervention, a brief outline of the program, and an overview of all materials included within *On-Task in a Box*.

Jensen and Sprick (2014) define on-task behavior as when the student is “maintaining eye contact with the teacher or directed task and is performing the requested task.” Off-task behavior is defined as “talking out loud, making noise, being out of one’s seat, being academically inactive, being noncompliant, and playing with an object during class time.” This template, successfully implemented by Rhode et al. (2010), simplifies the tracking of these behaviors to benefit those applying these programs. They have estimated a 35 % average discrepancy in on-task behavior between students performing adequately in the classroom and those who have difficulty in staying on-task. Students who struggle to stay on-task average approximately 50 % of on-task behavior while students who are performing adequately are generally on-task 85 % of the time. This suggests that those performing under the 85 % level are missing valuable learning opportunities. A primary focus of *On-Task in a Box* is to remediate this discrepancy. One possible drawback of this definition could be that the descriptors of on-task and off-task are not all mutually exclusive, and this could hamper some procedural integrity.

The authors discuss the benefits of increased on-task behaviors as evidenced in academic success, behavioral success, and increased positive interactions with the teacher and classmates. Improved academic achievement is accomplished by way of academic engagement in the classroom. Being on-task, a greater percentage of time concomitantly reduces the time available to spend and engage in disruptive behavior. The authors described on-task behavior as a “teacher pleasing behavior,” leading to more positive interactions between teacher and student resulting positive view of student by teacher. Infusing positive reinforcement into the classroom setting over time squeezes out the time available for off-task behaviors.

On-Task in a Box is designed for use with students with special needs as well as typical students having a difficult time staying on-task. It can be used in conjunction with medical interventions for ADHD also. Its effectiveness with students having severe behavior problems or learning skill deficits is

not clearly established and is not presented as a program objective. This is an area in need of applied research. Its focus is on kids in grades 1–6 who are off-task more than 50 % of the time. Studies that used similar procedures as *On-Task in a Box* have been shown to improve student’s rates of on-task behaviors by an average of 33–38 % in grades 2–5, and these studies are noted (Clare 1992; King 2012). The authors suggest that those administering the program be school employees with a background in behavioral management principles and applications; however, a review of *On-Task in a Box* suggests that the program could have utility in other settings as well (e.g., home or hospital).

The program is comprehensive. The materials needed for the implementation of the program are provided in the package including the facilitator’s manual, two MotivAiders®, a DVD with Fast-Hands Animation and Peer-Modeling Scenarios, a Reward Spinner, and a CD with all reproducible forms needed for the immediate implementation of the program from the beginning to end. The inclusion of all materials needed during all stages of implementation greatly improves the accessibility and usability of the program and reduces the time and effort that would otherwise be required of school staff creating documents, scoring protocol, and improvising coding systems.

MotivAiders® are small, easily portable devices that remind people through beeps or buzzing to manage their behavior (Flaute et al. 2005). Flaute et al. note the broad potential of uses for these devices and the track history of proven utility. The only necessary items not included in the box are participant rewards for achieving goals, although the authors make several helpful suggestions of effective rewards with little to no cost to the facilitator. In addition to the standard AV equipment generally available in most classrooms, the authors suggest that a video camera might be useful for including a self-modeling feature to the program, but this is optional.

Does It Work?

The authors present basic empirical evidence that supports the independent methodological components utilized in *On-Task in a Box* (i.e., self-monitoring, self-graphing, electronic prompting, peer modeling, self-modeling, and Fast-Hands Animation) as well as two studies that implemented the program design as a whole (i.e., Clare et al. 2000; King 2012). The presentation of empirical data in this section is useful to facilitators who may not have either the time or experience to research and interpret empirical data. Likewise, the inclusion of supportive research adds to the feasibility of implementing the program in the school setting and gaining the support of supervisors who may cautiously ask if the program fits within the realm of best practices.

Implementing with Individuals or Buddies

This section provides detailed instructions for implementing the intervention with a single targeted student or pair of targeted students. The presentation of the intervention is made clear with supporting materials included to implement the intervention including a detailed explanation as to how referrals happen, how to set up and conduct observations (along with coding examples and keys), and how to educate and orient teachers, parents, and students to the program and its objectives. Also covered is teaching students to self-monitor, how to conduct ongoing collaborative meetings with teachers, follow-up observations, programming for generalization, and proper fading of the program. A suggested script is provided for all interactions to maintain intervention procedural integrity. It is also very convenient that the facilitator's manual provides troubleshooting tips at all stages of the program.

In a pre-publication application of the *On-Task in a Box* program designed to assess program efficacy, King (2013) conducted a study with six students in second and third grades with on-task behaviors well below the 50 % threshold. Utilizing a multiple-baseline design with probes to measure the effectiveness of the program at various stages during the intervention, King (2013) reported that all six students showed a high degree of improvement in on-task behaviors, moving from an average of 21 % during baseline to 68 % at completion. This significantly closed the performance gap between the six targeted students and their peers. At a 3-week follow-up, rates of on-task behaviors remained stable or continued to improve slightly from intervention phase (King 2013).

Implementing with a Whole Class

This section provides instructions for facilitating the intervention with an entire class rather than one or a few targeted students. The authors noted that the facilitator should first gain experience in conducting the intervention with one or two students prior to implementing the protocol with an entire class. Battaglia et al. (2015) implemented the treatment in one second-grade classroom and two third-grade classrooms. Overall results showed immediate improvements of 12–33 % in on-task behaviors with strong maintenance effects among all three classrooms (Battaglia et al. 2015). The importance of intervention protocol integrity was underscored in the Battaglia et al. (2015) study in that they experienced inconsistencies in program implementation across the classrooms and noted differences in improvement rates as a result. Jensen and Sprick (2014) note this result in emphasizing the importance of procedural integrity when implementing *On-Task in a Box*.

Other Tools and Materials

Although the facilitator's manual is the primary resource describing the intervention, *On-Task in a Box* is a practice-ready program designed to include everything needed to implement the program all in one box. In addition to the facilitator's manual, *On-Task in a Box* includes two MotivAiders® for electronic prompting, a DVD with Fast-Hands Animation and video peer model examples for on-task behaviors, a CD with reproducible forms, and a reinforcement spinner.

Conclusions

The *Tough Kid On-Task in a Box* (Jensen and Sprick 2014) is the latest in a series of books and tool boxes produced by Jensen and colleagues specifically addressing discrete and identifiable problems with troubled school children, designed to boost social and behavioral skill sets. What is appealing about *On-Task in a Box* is that the materials necessary to carry out the programs and address specific behaviors with children are all available and ready for implementation in a nicely illustrated and easy-to-understand format. For ambitious teachers and specialists with special needs in a population or a singular acting out child in a classroom, this program bridges the gap between the science presented in academic journals and the specific demands of applied situations. Better still is the fact that these methods have been tested in applied settings with very successful outcomes (see Battaglia et al. 2015). *Tough Kid On-Task in a Box* is a user-friendly and cost-effective way to address, in school settings, one of the most frequently encountered behavioral problems.

Compliance with Ethical Standards Since this was a book review, there were no human or animal subjects directly involved in the work leading to this submission. Likewise, informed consent was unnecessary.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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