
Thoughts About the Termination Phase of Educational Therapy

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Termination of educational therapy remediation is one of the critical phases of our work. Others are establishing a relationship and adapting the remediation to the child's style. Much good remedial work can be lost if the termination phase is not handled correctly. Even at the beginning of our educational therapy work it is essential to keep in mind that these are important but finite relationships. Our goal is an eventual termination, when the students assume responsibility for their own learning, identify with their unique learning style, and are proud of their personal participation in making this termination possible. Our challenge is how to reach a successful conclusion and make it not only an ending to the students' important work and accomplishments with us, but also a beginning of the new phase in their lives that they helped make possible.

Because we are aware from the beginning of the educational therapy program that our eventual goal is termination, we must plan for how this will be achieved. It should not be just a final session during a last month. All along we should help students take credit for their accomplishments, making certain that they can identify these changes as their need for specialized help from us declines. How is this done?

THE BEGINNING CONTRACT PHASE WITH PARENTS

Inevitably parents will ask, "How long is this going to take?" This is an opportunity for the educational therapist to make it clear that since this is not a contract to "cure" the learning difficulties but a plan to help students learn how to learn and succeed at school on their own, there will be many variables to deal with. It is our chance to add something like, "In my experience, first the children learn to please me through their successes, and it is not until well into the second year that they begin to recognize they are pleasing themselves."

EARLY SESSIONS WITH THE STUDENTS

Your early-on introduction to students (and parents) will include straightforward comments about how the students will be learning how to learn on their own. The developmental stage of the students makes a difference to how these things are said.

Younger child: "How long do I have to come here?" (to me this questions my willingness to

stick with them and the wisdom and justification of their trusting me). **Response:** “You can count on me to help until your parents and you and I decide that you don’t need me anymore because you can do it alone.”

Older child (sitting in the orange chair in my office while we work on test responses in short increments and with visual aid): “I wish I could take this chair with me to take my tests in. I think better in it.”

Response: “Eventually all you learned to do in that orange chair will be in your head and you can answer on your own without it. That’s what we’re working toward.”

Note that in both of these examples the students, not the educational therapist, introduced the subject of their work. It is important to listen for opportunities such as these because the responses are best received when they are answers to students’ own concerns.

TRANSITION STAGES WITH STUDENTS

It is essential that the educational therapist include the students in big decisions such as termination, and that these decisions be introduced and discussed at a moment when they are not threatening to the students.

After checking with parents, new situations must be discussed in a timely fashion. Sometimes a child has been doing well, grades have improved, negativity has declined, and we are beginning to consider termination. How nice it would be to end on such a high note! But the educational therapist has many things to consider at such a point.

Have these students been thinking along the same lines as we have? Sometimes we have been considering the advisability of a change over a period of time without realizing that the students and their parents have not been included in that process. In such a case it is important to take the time to explore the students’ feelings about the big change. Be aware that termination constitutes leaving an important support and relationship (like the orange chair and me). Students often fear that in stopping they risk the loss of everything that has been gained; it is important to discuss the accomplishments as theirs, and specifically the ways in which they use their skills well on their own, giving examples. The right time for termination occurs when a goal agreed upon by parents, students, and educational therapist (and perhaps the teacher and/or psychotherapist) has been reached. Since everyone involved will have some concerns, it is a good time to talk about alternate or contingency plans, such as cutting back to fewer sessions in the interim, or meeting a few times during the summer.

Are there any anticipated changes coming up (new grade, school, move to a new town, parents’ divorce) that might challenge the students and lead to regression? Should another change such as termination be introduced now? These decisions are not solely based on how many grade levels the students have improved in reading speed or comprehension, or on their having finally learned the multiplication tables (those would be concerns for a tutoring contract); such a decision must take the whole dynamic into consideration and include the feelings of other important people involved in the students’ lives and education.

DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT TERMINATION DATE

Parents and educational therapists do not always agree on when students are ready to be on their own. This ranges from parents who precipitously cancel sessions to parents who are not ready for the scary idea of getting along without specialized help. As mentioned before, preparing for parental concerns about termination begins early when the educational therapy contract is clarified. The educational therapist must somehow gain the trust of the parents and convey that there is a need to talk together whenever changes are being considered. This necessitates making collaboration available and deciding with them how that is to be done. Usually, when the trust is just beginning, personal contact is essential; later it is possible that the less-personal email or telephone messages will suffice.

A parental decision to terminate before the educational therapist feels the students are ready is evidence of an unrecognized problem. This calls for a meeting of parents and educational therapist to explore their reasons for the sudden change. When there is no chance of continuing the contract, the therapist must consider the possible damage being done to the trust between her and her student and

1. Insist on at least one more session with that student, and
2. Offer to do this free of charge if necessary.

In addition, and in any case

3. Write a letter to the student summarizing what has been accomplished so far and conveying the idea that “the door is open” should the family consider renewing the work. No blame should be implied in the letter or in the above meetings.

When the opposite occurs and parents are not ready for the students to terminate (usually because they are not ready to lose this support system) then the educational therapist has to consider how legitimate their argument is for continuing. It means balancing the independence of

the students with the needs of the parents. Clearly under these circumstances it helps if the educational therapist has hard data from recent retesting and work reports that support the students' progress. Nevertheless, there is no clear answer for coping with a difference of opinion except that it is something that will need exploration and usually cannot be resolved in one session. The parents must be given time to get used to the idea that the educational therapist has been considering and has been preparing for since the contact and contract began.

TERMINATION NECESSITATED BY OUTSIDE CIRCUMSTANCES

There are times when outside circumstances mean that an educational therapy contract must be broken. Because therapists rely on their key relationships with their students to help the students through the challenges of remedial work, this relationship must be considered precious. Should the therapist know ahead of time that a premature discontinuance is inevitable, discussions of this termination should begin as early as seems clinically correct (depending on the developmental stage of the students and their understanding of time). The purpose is to prepare the students for an important change and to ready them to move to a new relationship without experiencing a subsequent distrust or fearing another precipitous termination. Such untimely terminations may occur when someone moves, when the educational therapist is in training or works at a clinic for a specific period of time, or when illness interferes. It can also occur when families have financial difficulties. In such cases it behooves the educational therapist to think of ways to continue contact until termination can be worked out. The main concern is for students to continue work with someone else as long as their trust issues and fears are attended to.

TOKENS OF TERMINATION

Much discussion is devoted to whether clinicians give gifts (other than their very best professional skills and service). In the same way, an educational therapist must consider the meaning of a gift and what, if any, would be significant when terminating. In my experience, no gift is big enough to reflect the importance of my relationship with students. Since I feel this way, I do search for other tokens of completion. These might include a photo of the two of us, a diploma that I make (especially for younger children), or, for older students it is often a copy of something they have said that I remarked about at the time, and have saved for this commemorative occasion. (For example, in the case of the "orange chair student" who happened to be a Star Wars fan, I made a card that said, "May the Orange Chair Be With You!") All educational therapists

must consider this issue before making their decision, which will depend on their own considerations and feelings for the meaning of gifts to their students.

SUMMARY

It is critical that successful educational therapy end in a meaningful termination phase for the student. This is a long phase whose groundwork begins with the initial contract with parents when it is clarified that this work is not about "curing" but about making it possible for students to learn on their own. In the educational therapy hours it begins when young children are reassured that you will be there for them until they no longer need your help, and with older students when you point out how the techniques they are learning from you will eventually be owned by them. It continues as you point out the students' accomplishments and their ability to do more and more things on their own. And finally, it ends with the celebration of the work that has been done and the knowledge that this has made it possible for the students to continue on to their exciting new phase.

Beverly Metcalf is a past President of AET and now serves the AET as Chair of its Advisory Board. She is retired from educational therapy practice but continues to write, lecture, and teach on the subject and serve as retired faculty, UCSF Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.