

Early learning: prerequisite skills

The strategies to develop early skills that are important for learning include:

- Using rewards and praise
- Teaching a child to sit down
- Teaching a child to wait
- Motivating a child
- Developing attention and concentration
- Developing imitation skills
- Modelling and prompting
- Forward and backward chaining

Using rewards and praise

Children with autism do not always have an in-built desire to please others. They often do not understand why they should do something they do not want to do. They may feel anxious when asked to do something unfamiliar and prefer to do activities they know and enjoy, ones that feel safe and help them feel secure (the same can be said of most children, especially when at a young age).

To encourage children to complete tasks you want them to do – particularly if it is unfamiliar or difficult for them – it is often necessary to give a reward. At first the reward must be something that is very motivating. Initially it should be something that can be given frequently and taken away (or eaten) in a very short time. Food can be broken into small pieces so that children are not being filled up with snacks between meals. Some children have particular interests or obsessions that can be used as a reward for doing what you want.

Rewards should always be given together with praise. When you praise a child you must always sound and look happy so the child understands your meaning even when they do not understand the words you have said. Praise should be clear and direct, for example, ‘good looking’, ‘good sitting’, ‘very good try’, ‘great drawing’.

Rewards and praise should be given immediately the child gives the correct response or completes the activity satisfactorily. He should know that when he has completed the task he will get the reward. Food rewards may be needed with young children, but they should be phased out and replaced with non-food rewards when the child has become used to following instructions and is generally co-operative.

As children grow older, more sophisticated systems of rewards can be put in place as they learn to wait for their reward. They could have tick charts or sticker books where they have to fill a certain number of boxes and are then given a special reward. The chart or book should say clearly what the reward (token, tick, sticker) is given for and this should be explained verbally and/or visually. It is important that reward charts and sticker books are designed to allow bad days to happen without upsetting the child’s motivation and make them feel the reward will never come. Do not take stickers away for bad behaviour, but be positive in your expectation that, although today was terrible, tomorrow will be better.

Teaching a child to sit down

When a child is sitting, he is more able to focus on what is in front of him and not become distracted by other things happening around him. He also knows that when he sits, he is expected to do something – listen to a story, draw a picture, do a puzzle, cut some paper, etc. A table and chair create a boundary around him that is important for a young child in helping him to pay attention to the task at hand.

What you can do

- Begin by having a suitably sized table and chair in a quiet area of the room. Have some very motivating toys on the table and see if your child will sit by herself to explore the toys. If not, try a little prompt – pat the chair and say ‘sit down’. Praise your child if she sits by saying ‘Good sitting!’ and immediately show her what wonderful things you have.
- Some children will run up to the table, take the most exciting thing off it and run away and play with it. You will then have to take the toy, say ‘my turn’ in a firm voice and try to tempt the child back to the table to play with the toy. Sometimes you may have to show him on the chair and immediately rewarding him with the toy and the phrase ‘Good sitting!’
- Very young or very active children may need food or drink rewards to teach them to sit. If so, go ahead and use them. They can be phased out and replaced by existing toys.
- Build up the time you expect your child to sit from a few seconds, for example to eat a snack, and up to 20 minutes or more to complete a number of activities you want to walk on with her. For a school-age child, you will want her to sit for the same time as her peers, although she may need some work adapted to meet her learning needs.

Sitting in groups

This can be very difficult for young children with autistic spectrum disorders. Here are some ideas to try:

- Sit the child on the edge or front of the group, near the adult.
- A very young child may need to sit on an adult’s knee at first.
- If the child is restless sitting on the floor/mat/carpet, sit him on a chair and have an adult sitting in a small chair behind him, lightly holding him.
- Some children find sitting in a large group is easier if they know where to sit. Have a mat or cushion marking where they should sit on the carpet.
- Remind the child verbally or visually (using a symbol or gesture) to sit quietly and listen.
- Use gestures, physical and verbal prompts to help the child join in with songs.
- When asking questions, use your child’s name to gain attention before asking the question.

Teaching a child to wait

Children with autistic spectrum disorders sometimes have difficulty understanding that something is going to happen in the near future. They may think that if it is not

happening now, then it is not going to happen at all. This can make them feel anxious and, in some children, the anxiety and frustration can result in a tantrum or aggressive behaviour.

What you can do

- Teach your child to wait. Use a symbol. Use the symbol within everyday activities to support the teaching of your child to wait. Use the symbol in activities every day.
- To begin with it is best to use a very motivating reward. Show your child what you have and ask if he wants it. For example, say 'Blow bubbles?' and blow lots of bubbles. When your child shows you that he wants more bubbles, say 'Wait' firmly and, at the same time, put the symbol card in front of him or give it for him to hold. Start by counting to five then say 'Good waiting!' and blow some more bubbles.
- Gradually increase the time your child has to wait before he is given what he wants. Do not increase the time too fast as your child may lose interest or become distressed. Go at a pace that feels right, and remember to use the verbal 'wait' as well as the visual prompt each time. Use the 'wait' sign with many different activities and in many different situations.
- When you feel that your child can wait for a reasonable length of time, which will vary depending on their age and understanding, you find you can stop using the visual prompt and just say 'wait'.
- Children who become anxious when they have to wait may benefit from a timer, such as a sand timer, or a simple clock depending on the age and understanding of the child, so they know how long they have to wait, or a card that says, for example, 'Wait for dinner' using symbols or words as necessary.

Motivating a child

It can be difficult to motivate children with autistic spectrum disorders to attempt different activities, complete tasks or follow instructions. They often do not have an intrinsic desire to please others and will not see the point of many activities they have to do, both at home and school.

What you can do

- Have a system of rewards and give your child the clear message 'Work now, play later.' In other words, finish this task and then you can play with your favourite toy.
- It is easier if rewards are shown visually. Your child needs to know what he has to do and what will happen when he has finished. Have a visual timetable that shows that less enjoyable tasks are followed by things that are more enjoyable.
- Sit your child where there are fewest distractions.
- Warn your child in plenty of time when an activity she enjoys is about to end and prepare her for the next.
- Check that your child has understood the instructions: make instructions simple and direct.

- With a young child remember to make rewards immediate. Gradually increase the length of time he has to wait for the reward, so that as he gets older he can wait for the reward to come at the end of the day or week.

Developing attention and concentration

There are many reasons for children with autism having difficulty paying attention. They may have heightened sensory awareness so that certain everyday sounds, colours, smells, and textures will fascinate, distract, or disturb them. These sensory difficulties can be very uncomfortable and overwhelming.

What you can do

Here are some of the things you could try to help increase your child's concentration span:

- Sit your child in the least distracting area of the room.
- Try not to shout.
- Be sensitive to your child's needs when introducing new experiences. Take it step by step, offering plenty of encouragement.

Here are a few small practical changes you can make:

- Make rewards very motivating and do not make your child wait too long for the reward to come.
- Ensure your child knows how much work he has to do and what is going to happen when he has finished.
- If possible, adapt the work to include your child's interests. For example, if he loves trains and is learning to use a number line, make the number line into a train.
- Take things step-by-step and build up the work at a pace that suits your child.

If a child will not settle

If your child is having a bad day and is very inattentive, it may be better to give her a break rather than possibly make the situation worse by trying to continue. It is important not to take your child away from her work and give her something that is normally given as a reward. Try to find other distractions, if that is what is needed. The reward must be earned, although it is perfectly fine to give the reward for effort rather than success. A very small task can require a huge effort when we are having a really bad day.

Developing imitation skills

Children learn some new skills by copying others. This can be difficult for many children with autistic spectrum disorders. Most important is your awareness. If your child has difficulty copying you, then you can not depend on it when teaching a new skill. Your child needs to perform actions that are meaningful.

What you can do

- With young children, play games where you copy their sounds and actions and see if they respond. When you are sure you have his attention, copy him and change it a little to see if your child will copy you.
- Even with a verbal child, it is better to keep language to a minimum as the child will find it easier if you give an example of what he is supposed to do, rather than a lengthy explanation. If you are teaching him to sort fruit into apples, pear, and oranges, you can demonstrate what to do by simply using the words, 'apple', 'pear', and 'orange' and show where the fruit has to go.
- Repetition is important, especially with a young child. You may think that she is never going to drink that pretend cup of tea or wave goodbye or draw a picture. One day, though, it will happen; often when you are not watching.

Prompting and modelling

Prompting, modelling, and shaping are techniques that can be used to teach skills in a structured step-by-step process. They are particularly important for children with autistic spectrum disorders who often have poor imitation skills and do not understand what they have to do.

Prompting

For example, if you wanted to teach your child to pedal a tricycle, you will need to use a physical prompt: you put his feet on the pedals, put your hands over his feet and push them around. Doing this slowly, as much as your child will tolerate each day, and gradually he may gain confidence. As you push his foot down on the pedal you use a verbal prompt, 'Push! Push!'. Gradually you withdraw the physical prompt by making it lighter, so your child has to use more effort to pedal, but not so light that he gives up.

This technique can be used for teaching most physical skills, particularly if the child is having difficulty imitating or understanding verbal instructions. The hardest but most important thing to do is withdraw the physical prompt as soon as possible; otherwise your child can become dependent upon it. A verbal prompt is a good initial back up, but it too can gradually be withdrawn or replaced by a sign or gesture.

Modelling

This technique is used for children who are able to copy what you do. You show your child what to do, then ask her to copy you. If she is unable to copy or makes an error, you may want to show her again or use a physical or verbal prompt to help her complete the activity successfully.

Shaping occurs when you change a child's skills or behaviour in small steps to reach a desired target. For example, if he always makes circular marks on paper, you can show him how to draw a circle then a face, then other circular drawings. If he likes making the sound 'mamamamama' you could start by copying the sound and change it to 'mum' then 'mummy', or if he waves his hands to music you might show him how to clap. Shaping is a natural response when teaching young children and should be used consistently with plenty of praise for each new step.

Hand over hand

If your child does not mind being touched, some skills can be taught by putting your hands over your child's and doing it with her. This can be helpful when teaching skills that require manipulation and fine-motor skills, such as taking lids off pots, using switches, using a knife and fork, using a pencil or paintbrush, etc.

Again, it is most helpful to gradually take your hands away so the child can do the last step unaided, then the last two steps and so on.

Forward and backward chaining

These are two useful techniques. If you think of an activity as a chain or sequence of tiny actions then forward chaining is when you get a child to perform the first action in the sequence which you then complete, and backward chaining is when you get a child to perform the last action in the sequence which you have started. The child has the pleasure of successfully completing a task. You then gradually increase the amount your child has to do as s/he becomes more competent until s/he is doing the whole activity.

Backward chaining builds confidence and is rewarding for the child. It is possible to teach many skills in this way.

The important things to remember are:

- break the task into small steps
- teach your child one step at a time
- be consistent: for example, do not have a different adult teaching the child to use a knife and fork in a different way every day
- make sure success is built in to the process
- use a lot of praise.

Further reading:

Hannah, L. (2001). *Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn: a practical guide for parents and staff in mainstream schools and nurseries*. London: The National Autistic Society.