Part 2:

Behavioral Strategies for Teaching

Ideas from Applied Behavior Analysis

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This presentation…

The information in these slides continues what was presented in part one ("Teaching & Behavioral Challenges").

This is a presentation for families and others who take care of kids who need extra help in learning and managing behavior. It is designed so that you can read through it on your own. On some slides there are additional resources that you can explore on the Internet or in books or organizations.

Please note…

As we mentioned before, this presentation will give you ideas and techniques that you may use and that may be helpful. However, additional professional guidance is usually needed. This presentation *is not enough, by itself, to prepare families to plan and implement behavioral programs on their own*. This is especially true for children who have problems that are severe or have been going on for a long time.

The foundation for learning

In the last presentation, we said that learning occurs when:

- The child is **motivated** to do something or get something

- There are previously-learned skills that can be used as **building blocks** to do something new

- The surroundings provide the right **supports** (things that can serve as cues for the skill and can reinforce the use of the skill)

- The new skill produces an outcome that makes it more likely to occur next time it is needed (that is, "**reinforcement**")

Now we will get more specific about each of these four things

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Motivation – the energy and desire to do something

*A child who **wants** to put on his shoes is likely to look for his shoes and try to put them on. Why does he want to put the shoes on? Maybe having shoes on will make it possible to go outside or go somewhere, and the only way to go somewhere is to have the shoes on. Perhaps his parents have a rule that you must have shoes on to go somewhere. His parents have recognized what might be reinforcing for this child and arranged things in a way that motivates him to put shoes on.*

Motivation – the energy and desire to do something

Another child is working on her eating skills – using a spoon to scoop and bring food to her mouth without spilling. Her parents have found a particular soup that she loves, and they also know what cereals she likes. They help her work on using a spoon at mealtimes when one of these things will be served. That is, they take advantage of times when this child will be motivated to use a spoon.

In these examples, parents know what will work as reinforcers for their child's behavior, and they arrange things so that the child will be motivated to work on the skill.

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Motivation – it's about the situation the child is in

In the previous examples, parents got the child motivated by arranging things in the environment. Motivation does not just come from within – it can come from having good things that can happen if the child uses the skill!

Here's what we can do to increase motivation:

1. Figure out what would be the natural reinforcer for the skill we want to work on, or

2. Decide what reinforcer we are going to use, and then

3. Work on the skill at a time when that reinforcer will be particularly strong

    (In other words: *when will the child "want" that reinforcer*?)

In the first example, the natural reinforcer for putting on shoes was getting to go somewhere. Parents could work on putting on shoes just before a fun outing.

In the second example, the reinforcer for using the spoon was getting the food to the mouth. Parents worked on the skill when the favorite soup or cereal was served.

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What about motivation to *work with you*?

It is important that your child be willing to work with you. He or she should expect to have some good things happen when you work together. We often have to get our kids to do things they may not like to do, and if we are not careful, our kids may expect trouble when they see us. It's as if they say, "Uh-oh, here comes mom (or dad), it's gonna be bad."

For your child to be willing to work with you on things that may be difficult for him or her, it is important that you spend time together just playing or hanging out. *Spending enjoyable time together is as important a goal for therapy as spending time working on skills!* Find things that you enjoy together, or hang out with your child when she is doing something she likes.

What about motivation to *work with you*?

It is also very important, when you teach, to *start where your child is* and increase your expectations gradually. If he has only just started to tolerate taking turns, do not expect him to wait for five kids to take a turn ahead of him on day one.

Start with something that he will probably succeed at.

Then go in small enough steps that the child will frequently succeed!

Building Blocks

If we were learning to tell time, it would be important that we know our numbers from 1 to 12, and that we know the sequence of the numbers (that is, 4 comes after 3).

We should also have some experience with the sequences that time represents – that we do "this first and that afterwards," and that we have to be "on time" for things like school, and so on. These things make the time on the clock meaningful.
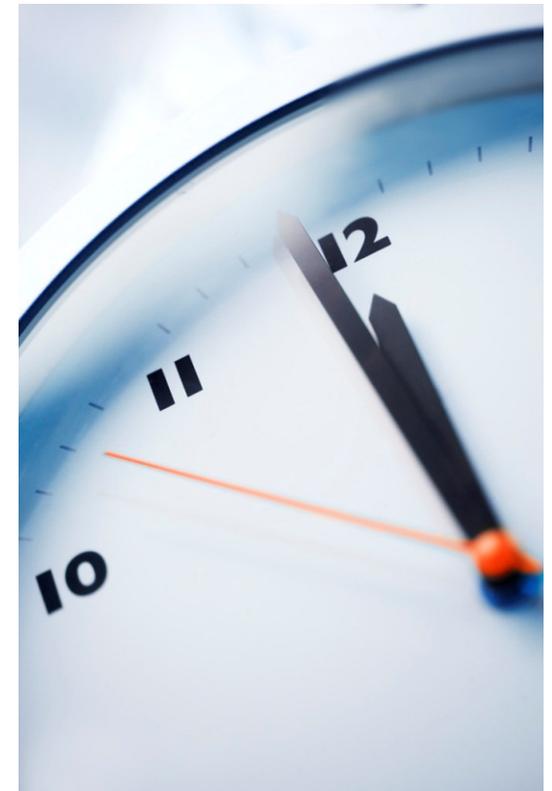
These are some of the "building blocks" for telling the time that is shown on a clock. The more of these building blocks that the child has, the more easily we can teach the skill. I am referring to them as "building blocks" because they form a foundation on which we build the skill. As you can imagine, if we tried to teach time-telling to a child who had none of this foundation – could not recognize numbers or put things in a sequence, and so on – we would not get very far.

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Building Blocks

To summarize: One of the very important behavioral strategies for teaching is to be able to:

- Break skills down into smaller parts

- Figure out what other component skills are necessary in order to really use the skill

- Know what might be a good sequence in which to teach the skills

Knowing these things helps us figure out where to start teaching – to know what the child is ready for. It also helps insure that the child does not get "stuck" and unable to keep making progress.

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Building Blocks

Here is another example:

A mom wanted to teach her daughter to accept constructive criticism. She believed that the component skills would include:

- *Listening to another person and engaging in short back-and-forth conversations*

- *Understanding the words and phrases she was hearing*

- *Tolerating hearing some negative things about herself, without disruptive displays of anger*

- *Responding by saying what she thought about the criticism, including whether she thought it was accurate and what she could offer to do about it*

Together with her daughter, she planned a couple of "pretend" or role-played situations in which the mother (and then, at school, the teacher) would talk with the daughter about a problem, to observe whether the daughter had each of these component skills for accepting constructive criticism.

Supports for the skill

If there are no cues for a skill, and no reinforcers for it, the skill will die off after a while. It would not get learned in the first place if none of these "supports" is present.

If you said "hello" to people, looked them in the eye, asked them how their day was going, but no one ever responded, you would eventually quit.

If you knew "left" and "right," were capable of following directions, and could visualize where your destination was, but you found yourself in an unfamiliar place with no signs, no map, and no one to ask, you could not use your skills for finding your way around.

Supports may be the cues and reinforcers that are a natural part of the situation, and they also can be the cues and reinforcers that we plan to use in teaching.

If we want a child to use a skill, we may need to think about whether the right kinds and amounts of supports are present to meet that individual child's needs. Often, people with challenges in neuropsychological or developmental functioning *need extra supports*, at least until the skill gets started.

Supports for the skill

So how do we balance these two things:

- Encouraging independence, not "doing for" the child what they can do themselves

- Providing supports to help them learn

First, we make sure that there is some sort of positive thing that can happen when the child uses the skill. Remember, there should be at least some sort of reinforcer for using the skill, or else it will be very difficult to keep the skill going.

Second, we can try to remove any unnecessary barriers to using the skill – these barriers might include physical discomfort, teasing from others, or high frustration. The child might need to try to "work through" some level of discomfort , but high levels of discomfort, frustration, embarrassment, and effort may keep the child from trying and wanting us to do it for them.

If we have addressed these two areas (reinforcement and barriers to using the skill), this will help the child be willing to give a good effort and try to be independent.

Cues that tell when and where to use a skill

The things around us tell us when and where to do something. For example:

- *School books may be a reminder to do homework, and the questions and problems within the books are cues for us to think, answer, and work problems*

- *Dirty dishes sitting on the table remind some of us to wash them. However, if seeing the dirty dishes does not work as a cue, someone may tell us, "please wash the dishes." This is another form of cue.*

- *Another person suggesting that we do something that we know is wrong can (hopefully) be a cue for us to stop and think before doing what they say. That would be a natural cue to use some problem-solving skills.*

Some cues, like the school books, the dirty dishes, and the person tempting us to do the wrong thing, occur naturally. If they work to get the skill to occur, that's great! However, sometimes we have to arrange cues to help the skill to occur. The verbal reminder, "wash the dishes," is an example of this.

Verbal reminders: the good and the bad

Telling someone to do something can be a good thing, if we use it sparingly and if it works. On the other hand, many of us overuse these verbal cues – for example:

- *Repeating an instruction over and over even though it isn't working*

- *Repeating it louder or more angrily to try to make it work*

- *Continuing to use verbal cues for so long that the child becomes dependent on hearing the reminder – that is, not trying to get the child to respond to the natural cues in the situation*

We want the child to begin washing the dishes when it's his turn to do it *without* having to be verbally reminded, right?

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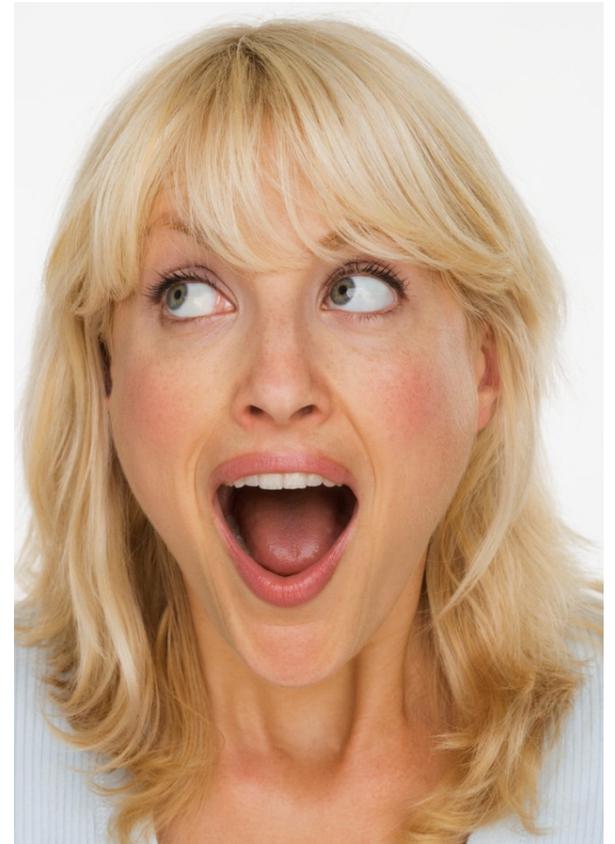
Good supports can change with the child

The right supports change as the child changes:

- *When a baby is taking his first steps, one parent will kneel and support the baby until he gets his balance, while the other parent sits in front of the baby and calls to him, ready to catch him after a step or two.*

- *A few short months later, a parent simply calls the toddler, who is expected to make his way across the room with no one at his side, and when he gets there no one throws a party to celebrate. He does not need those things now, and has moved on to other things.*

With older kids, the same principle applies. We provide lots of support when the teenager learns to drive, and gradually pull back the supports as she gets good at it. We go over the checkbook carefully with the child when he gets his first bank account, but gradually give less support. We may cook alongside the child the first few times, looking at the instructions together and giving reminders and feedback, but after a while we just let him or her go and brag about how good it tastes when it's ready!

Reinforcement

- "Reinforcement" is another concept that scientists have studied but certainly did not invent. We naturally reinforce each other's behavior every day, often without thinking about it.

- Everything from a "thank you" to winning a lottery might be a reinforcer for some behavior of ours. The "thanks" might reinforce some act of kindness on our part – that is, might make us more likely to do the same thing again. The lottery winnings might reinforce buying lottery tickets or watching for lottery results.

- Needless to say, what is a reinforcer for one person may not be for another. Praise – being told how good you did – is not a reinforcer for everyone, though it is for many. We get hints about what may be a reinforcer for someone by watching what they prefer to do and what things they like.

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Is the use of reinforcement "natural"?

- As mentioned previously, we do things that reinforce each other's behavior all the time, with a word, a touch, a smile, doing something nice for someone who has done a good job, and so on. It is the built-in, natural way that we influence each other.

- The more we *plan* how we want to influence someone, the less natural it seems. We're kind of suspicious of people who are obvious about trying to influence our behavior. However, teachers and therapists do it all the time – it is their job to try to move a person toward a desired goal. Parents are supposed to do the same thing, helping their children grow and learn.

- When we use obvious reinforcers that are not a natural part of the situation (such as giving candy to a child when he makes his bed), this also may look odd to us. Many of us think that using these "artificial" reinforcers is OK when the learner has trouble learning without them. Additionally, once the skill is learned, we can try to shift toward using natural reinforcers, if possible.

Using reinforcers so that they work

When we plan to teach a particular skill or "target behavior," we should use reinforcers effectively:

- Use something that is shown to be a reinforcer for that person (not just something that we assume the person will like)

- When the target behavior occurs, the reinforcer must be given *immediately* – even a short delay may mean that it does not work

- When the target behavior occurs, the reinforcer must be given *consistently* – that is, we should plan to reinforce the behavior every time it occurs, for a while, and then less often but still regularly

- Using the skill (the target behavior) should be the best and easiest way to get the reinforcer. If we promise a special treat if the child works on the skill, the treat should *only* be given if the child actually works on the skill.

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What's next?

You have finished **part two,** "Behavioral Strategies for Teaching." In the next section we will talk more about problem behaviors.

Want to read more? Here are just a few of the many books out there:

Steps to Independence (4th Edition) – Bruce Baker and Alan Brightman

Teaching Social Skills to Youth (2nd Edition) - Tom Dowd and Jeff Tierney

Teaching Social Communication to Children with Autism: A Manual for Parents - Brooke Ingersoll and Anna Dvortcsak

Need more individual and in-depth assistance with planning teaching strategies? Here are some resources you might consider:

- Talk with your family doctor or specialist

- Call a university that has a strong program in Applied Behavior Analysis, such as the one at the University of North Texas, https://pacs.unt.edu/behavior-analysis/

- Check out the directory of behavioral consultants maintained by the Texas Association for Behavior Analysis, http://www.txaba.org/resources.php