



Teaching young children with autism new skills

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For those of us in the field of working with young children with autism and their families, past experience has taught us many things, including what does and doesn't work. One of these is that it is better to replace so called "difficult behaviour" with a new skill. In other words, if we want to remove undesirable behaviour it is better to teach the child a new or replacement behaviour. If the undesirable behaviour is removed but nothing is taught in its place, another undesirable behaviour may take its place so the child is no better off. Here's an example.

No avocados please!

"Lucien" had a preoccupation with holding avocados at kindergarten and insisted on his mother buying two whenever they left the house. He had no interest in toys. This was becoming an expensive exercise and a behaviour programme was put in place to remove his interest in avocados. He was not permitted to have or hold any avocados at kindergarten and was to be rewarded with a treat at the end of an avocado free day. He became extremely upset and after three days was given a banana to hold instead. The plan was successful and the child lost interest in avocados but has now switched to demanding two bananas whenever he is out. Bananas get soft and squishy very quickly so the plan has backfired!

More on this story later...

The approach to behaviour management that combines teaching children new skills together with the suppression of undesirable behaviours is preferable to teaching that only removes the undesired behaviour.

There are several ways of encouraging and increasing new behaviours and teaching new skills. Three commonly used methods are: the use of prompts, shaping and chaining.

Prompting

This is a method that is used when the required behaviour does not exist at all. The child does not need prerequisite skills for this approach. Because the child is guided to perform the response, he/she does not need visual imitation skills and is successful when teaching young children with very few skills. It also does not require the child to have existing speech or comprehension of speech. It is a gentle and supportive teaching method that helps the child to be successful.

There are a number of ways to prompt a child.

Physical prompts are literally “hands on” attempts to encourage the new behaviour or skill. For example, if the new behaviour required is for the child to eat using a fork rather than his fingers, the physical prompt will involve putting your hand over the child’s on the fork and helping him to stab the food and lift it to his mouth.

Verbal and picture prompts involve telling and showing the child what to do. A verbal prompt might be: “Push your fork into the sausage” and the next prompt might be: “Put the sausage in your mouth”. Verbal prompts need to be very explicit and concrete at first. It is not sufficient to just say “Use your fork” as it doesn’t tell the child exactly what he should be using his fork for. For example, the child might use his fork to bang on the plate but not put food on it. A clear photograph of the behaviour or skill may help if the child understands photographs. In this case the child may be shown a photograph of the sausage on the fork when given the verbal prompt “Do this”.^{NB} Before using photographs as visual prompts, it is important to assess whether the child understands the symbolism of photographs otherwise they will be meaningless to the child.

Pointing can also be used to prompt the correct response when the more obvious physical hands on and verbal prompts are no longer necessary. The idea of using prompts is that eventually the prompt will fade and become unnecessary over time.

At first a combination of prompts is usually required. For example, a physical prompt will be combined with a verbal prompt that clearly tells the child what to do as he is doing it. As the behaviour is improving, the physical prompt may be dropped and a more subtle point used with the verbal prompt instead.

Very subtle prompts can be used very successfully with older children where a new behaviour has been learnt but the child still needs just a little cue or reminder of what to do. For example, in the classroom, a child who continually shouted out to enthusiastically contribute to the class had to learn to put up his hand and wait for the teacher to say his name. The cue he continued to need was simply the teacher raising a finger to indicate that he needed to raise his hand. The benefit of a small cue is that it helps the child without being obvious to everyone else.

Shaping

Shaping is another commonly used method to teach a new behaviour/skill. This method involves encouraging and reinforcing successive approximations of the new behaviour until the behaviour is learnt. It is another example of a gentle teaching method that does not push the young child too hard and the child can be rewarded for any attempt rather than only when the response is accurate.

For example, if the child is unable to wave bye-bye, any attempt to raise a hand or arm in response to your waving bye-bye is rewarded. It may begin with only a slight movement. As the child gets better at raising her arm and moving her hand you wait until both occur before giving the reward. The child learns that more is expected of her in gradual steps until the whole wave action is learnt.

Shaping is a useful method to use with young children at any developmental level. It does not require the child to have an existing level of speech or comprehension of speech. Shaping can be used without spoken instructions, although praise and encouragement through words usually accompanies the reward. It does require some ability in the child to attend to and imitate an action. If the young child does not have joint attention skills then these would have to be taught before using the shaping teaching method.

Chaining

This is a useful way of teaching a more complex behaviour or task and involves breaking it down into small steps. The steps are then taught one at a time. As each step is learnt, the next is taught. You can't miss steps, or teach them out of logical order. You can chain either backwards or forwards, which sounds complicated, but isn't.

Self-help skills, such as dressing are often taught using this method. For example, putting on pants. The task has a lot of different steps which need to be thought about and written down. If you are forward chaining, you start with the first step which may be picking the pants up in both hands. The next step may then be lifting one leg to step into the pants etc. If you are using backward chaining you teach the other way around and start with the last step first which would be the final pulling up of the pants and then working backwards in small steps until the entire task is learnt. The trickiest part to chaining is probably sitting down and working out the steps involved and then deciding on whether you will teach the steps in order going forward or backward. The good thing about chaining is that the task is broken down into tiny steps that do not overwhelm the child and you work through one step at a time until the whole task has been learnt. Success builds on success as each step is mastered.

The chaining method is very successful when teaching young children with few skills and who also have little language. If the child understands photographs you can photograph each teaching step in the chain and use a few at a time depending on how much the child can understand.

These are just three simple teaching methods but importantly they encourage the child to learn in a gentle way that is positive and supportive. Young children are more likely to learn new skills when they are taught with these methods. Punitive approaches that punish a child for "getting it wrong" have no place in current ethics and ideas about teaching children with autism.

No avocados please! ...continued

A different approach was taken and that was to replace "Lucien's" preoccupation with holding fruit with some simple play skills. Because he was always holding an avocado or banana, his hands were not free to learn about playing. The teaching method used was prompting using verbal and visual prompts.

First step was to find out what he liked and found rewarding (apart from holding bananas). His parents said he loved looking at supermarket advertising catalogues and pictures of trucks.

Because "Lucien" liked fruit it was decided to make use of this interest and he was given some plastic play fruit and some play ideas mats were made up (see fact sheet "Using a play ideas mat"). He was permitted to hold one piece of plastic fruit and he chose a banana. With physical prompts he was shown how to do what was on the play ideas mat. There were several of these including a simple inset board with banana shapes, play dough pictures of rolling a banana and other shapes, and some outlines of fruit that he could fill in with paint on the easel. His attempts to do any of these tasks were praised and rewarded with time looking at a favourite supermarket catalogue or truck book.

Over the next three months "Lucien" learned to play with other toys at kindergarten.