

A large, light gray sunburst graphic with a semi-circle at the bottom and several rays extending upwards and outwards.

Hot Tips For IY Autism Programs

Teaching about the ABCs of Child Learning

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There are many video vignettes in both the Incredible Years (IY) Autism Parent and Teacher Programs that lend themselves to teaching about the ABCs of child learning; A (Antecedent which motivates), B (Behavior or target goal for child) and C (Consequence that is rewarding). Teachers and parents can use the ABCs to enhance children’s language development, social skills, and emotional regulation. In the IY Basic programs, more time is spent on language coaching, giving positive attention to and reinforcing (C) the typical child’s targeted “positive opposite” social and self-regulation behaviors (B) and ignoring the less productive behaviors. For many children on the autism spectrum, this approach will need some tailoring. When working with a child with ASD who doesn’t spontaneously develop nonverbal communication, gestures, and has impaired or delayed receptive and expressive verbal communication, the teacher or parent cannot wait for typical language and social behaviors to spontaneously occur. Therefore, the intensity of the positive consequences and reinforcers for targeted behaviors must be highlighted or spotlighted for these children. Moreover, because these children are not usually as interested or motivated by a desire to please others, get approval, or share experiences, nor are they as affected by other’s disapproval, they miss out on many learning opportunities. They are not naturally learning from observing others, or from social reinforcers in the same way as a neurotypical child.

Therefore, parents and teachers need to scaffold, prompt, and engage in carefully crafted ABC scenarios designed to use a child’s *motivating antecedent* (A) to elicit the child’s developmentally appropriate target behavior which will then be reinforced by something important to the child. Once parents and teachers understand the ABCs they will find they can turn almost any interaction or activity into an ABC learning opportunity or habit designed to teach their children more age-appropriate and socially acceptable ways of behaving. Many of these opportunities for ABC teaching are demonstrated on the video vignettes and role play practices suggested in the leader manual following the discussion of the vignettes. This document is designed to give you a little more understanding of the ABC process of learning for these children. The ABCs are based on the research and science of *Applied Behavior Analyses*, often known as ABA. ABA principles underlie many of the vignettes discussed in both the IY autism parent and child programs.

Step #1: Identify the child’s motivating antecedents. From the “*How I am incredible?*” template for the child or student, identify the child’s likes and dislikes. (See handout for list of a child’s likes and dislikes in the IY Leader Manual.) Offering the “likes” and removing or avoiding the “dislikes” can be highly reinforcing for these children and can be used to motivate them to learn new

behavior patterns. Moreover, understanding the child's likes helps the parent or teacher get into the child's *attention spotlight* (joining the child with attention and imitation in their unique play experiences, even when the activity may seem unconventional or doesn't make sense).

Usually a teacher or parent can tell what objects and activities a child likes by observing what they do repetitively. Examples of some common likes are lining up cars or other objects, playing consistently with a certain toy, wanting a particular food, helping with a particular household chore, reading the same book over and over, singing, playing with the dog, being held or swung, rough and tumble play, bouncing, or tickling, or other sensory activity.

There are examples in the video vignettes of children motivated by the spinning chair, playing chase with dad, blowing up balloons, banging hexagons, using play dough, playing with puppets, eating a particular food, using the I-phone, and popping and chasing bubbles. In other words, children's strong preferences for an activity or object such as these can be used as a motivating antecedent (A) to prompt a target behavior which is then given to reinforce the occurrence of the desired activity. For example, in the case of Hudson, the parent uses his son's love of blowing bubbles to get him to learn the target verbal behavior (B), that of asking him to blow bubbles which is followed by the rewarding consequence (C) of the father blowing the bubble for him to chase. It is also possible to use a child's dislike as a motivator. For example, if a child dislikes a loud noise, such as the vacuum, the noise may be removed if the child exhibits the desired appropriate behavior of asking or signaling the parent to turn it off. It is important that this ABC sequence be used for developmentally appropriate target behaviors and not for misbehavior. For example, giving the child his favorite stuffed animal when he screams or throws something on the floor will reinforce the child's undesirable screaming as a strategy to get what he wants. Here the child has achieved his goal and will have been reinforced for screaming by getting the stuffed animal. In the same vain, if the parent or teacher removes the toothbrush because the child put up a screaming fight during tooth brushing, then the child learns that protesting accomplishes the goal of ending the tooth brushing. In this case, the child has been reinforced by the removal of the aversive event (negative reinforcement). Instead, the parent or teacher will use a motivating antecedent to get the child to use a more appropriate behavior to get what he wants.

Step #2: Choose the developmentally appropriate target behavior

Once the parent or teacher understands the antecedents (A) and consequences (C) for strengthening the desirable behaviors as well as those that might be underlying the undesirable behaviors, the next step is to be clear and specific about the positive target behaviors. For example, if the parent or teacher is working to teach a child how to ask for what he wants, then unpack what "asking" means according to the child's language ability. For the child with some language skills, the parent or teacher might work on saying, "truck please". For a child with less language, it might be just making the "T" sound combined with putting his hand out to gesture "give me". Or, if the child has no language the goal might be to teach how to point or use a visual picture system to indicate wants. For some children, the first step might be the parent or teacher modeling pointing while saying the word point or actual name of object wanted and then physically moving the child's hand into a point gesture. Later the pointing visual prompt might be added to give the child another way to indicate his wants. In each case, the target nonverbal

or verbal behavior has been carefully thought out and then the rewarding antecedent and consequence will be employed. Choosing the developmentally appropriate target behavior is important to the success of the ABC teaching loop. The chosen target behavior should be one small step up from the child's current level.

Step #3: Using the ABCs to motivate the target behavior

It is important to offer the antecedent (the thing the child wants), wait for the desired behavior response (targeted communication or social behavior), and then give the reinforcing consequence. Frequently when these children don't respond, the parent or teacher gives the reward anyway, either to avoid a tantrum or because they don't believe the child is capable of the response. This means they have lost the leverage to teach the child a way to communicate their needs.

Step #4: Provide many ABC scripts and learning opportunities

One or two practices using the ABC sequence is not going to teach the child the behavior. Try to set the practice up to provide many learning opportunities. In the IY video vignette of the father using bubbles (motivating antecedent) with Hudson, he blew one bubble at a time so that Hudson would have further learning opportunities to ask him to blow again. Repetition is key. Another example of breaking down activities into small chunks for more learning opportunities would be during a snack or meal time with a preferred food or drink. In this case the teacher or parent would give a small amount of the food item such as a slice of apple or banana each time the child asks. In this way, the child has multiple chances to practice asking (verbally or with gestures).

Step #5: Enhancing the effectiveness of the ABC script

In addition to setting up these ABC learning opportunities, the parent or teacher can add social value to the reinforcing consequence by joining in with the child: imitating the child's behaviors by chasing a bubble, or taking a bite of the food item at the same time the child does and verbalizing enjoyment (yum!).

Step #6 The Value of Modeling Behaviors

The parent or teacher may also teach the desired by modeling the asking behavior. For example, if the child's target behavior was to ask for a banana with one word, the adult could model this behavior, asking the child to share a piece of his banana, by saying, "banana please" and modeling pointing to the banana. Gesturing and using body language along with using the word can enhance the child's understanding of the word.

Helping Parents and Teachers Plan their ABCs

Group leaders can sometimes find it helpful to help parents and teachers make an ABC table outlining the possible antecedents and consequences and the specific target behavior for their target children. For example:

Motivating Antecedent Behavior (child's goal)	Targeted Child Behavior	Consequence that Rewards Target Behavior	Parent/Teacher Behaviors to Promote Learning
Child who is nonverbal			
Wants car	Child points to object	Child given 1-2 cars out of set of cars	Adult takes child's hand and forms finger into pointing gesture; gives car and waits for another request.
Wants to be picked up	Child puts out arms	Child is picked up	Adult puts child's arms out, or models putting out arms before picking up child and saying, "up".
Wants banana	Child puts out hand and says "b" sound	Child given segment of banana	Adult says "b, b, banana" and gestures with hand out as gives piece of banana.
Wants Apple	Child points to picture of apple on visual card of fruit options	Child given piece of apple	Adult joins child in pointing saying "apple" and also eats apple while saying "yummy apple"
Wants playdough	Child looks at playdough, points, makes a sound and smiles	Child gets piece of playdough for a few minutes	Adult gives child playdough and smiles and imitates child's verbalizations
Child who is somewhat verbal			
Wants car	Child says "ca" and points	Child given 1-2 cars out of set	Adult imitates saying "car" several times and pointing.
Wants to be picked up	Child says "up" and points	Child picked up	Adult says "up please" while picking child up
Wants banana	Child says "nana please"	Child given segment of banana	Adult also takes a segment of banana and says "yummy banana" while eating.

Wants Apple	Child says "want apple"	Child given piece of apple	Adult gives child 2 pieces of apple and praises "nice asking". Then gestures to self and asks, "Mommy wants apple please."
Wants playdough	Child says "play playdough"	Gets piece of playdough for a few minutes	Adult plays alongside child, saying: "fun to play with playdough."

Antecedent	Unwanted Behavior/Replacement	Consequence	
Motivating Antecedent Behavior (child's goal)	Unwanted Behavior/Target Replacement Behavior	Consequence that Rewards Target Behavior	Parent/Teacher Behaviors to Promote Learning
Stuffed animal	Grabbing/Asking or Pointing	Grabbing does not get stuffed animal/ asking does	Holding stuffed animal says, "you can say teddy please".

Cautions:

Be sure you are not reinforcing undesirable behaviors by withdrawing demands or giving in when the child tantrums. If the child is engaging in unwanted behavior that is not harmful to another person, it can be ignored. When the unwanted behavior ends, if feasible, provide an opportunity for the child to use the positive opposite behavior to achieve the desired outcome (prompt the child to ask, gesture, for what they want). This will not be appropriate in all situations. There are times when the child's desired outcome is not something that the parent can or should do even if the child asks appropriately.

Sometimes it can be tempting to avoid problem behaviors by giving children the desired item without requiring the child to communicate the request. Parents may jump to appease the child by always anticipating the child's desires ahead of time; for example, providing the stuffed animal, toy, or snack before the child has "asked" for it. This takes away a possible learning opportunity. If the child doesn't have to do anything to get what they want, then there is no opportunity for learning to ask or to respond to the interaction. Instead prompt, model, and coach the target request behavior that you have identified for the child (verbal or nonverbal request) be it verbal or a nonverbal gesture or visual prompt