

The 7 Steps

The Seven Steps to Earning Instructional Control with your Child

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Parents working to help their children overcome the effects of autism face many challenges on a daily basis. As a consultant working with the sciences of Applied Behavior Analysis and Verbal Behavior I seldom get through a day where I am not asked a question that entails the phrase “How can I get my child to _____?” That question typically ends with “stay seated during meals”, “not run into the street”, “use the toilet,” or any one of a thousand different things that children with autism might not choose to do when asked. The problem with these questions is that they are all symptoms of the same problem. Brainstorming ideas to affect one of these symptoms only provides a patch until the next symptom arises. The root problem for all of these questions is that the family has not effectively earned their child’s instructional control. Until they do, life will always be about trying to put out one fire after the other and hoping to get some teaching in amongst the flames.

Earning Instructional control is the most important aspect of any autism intervention or learning relationship. Without it you are powerless to consistently help guide your child. Void of your guidance your child’s skill acquisition is reliant on his interests. Unless you are able to help your child to overcome his own desires and participate in your learning activities you will not be able to help him in meaningful ways. Instructional control can be thought of as nothing more than a positive working relationship. Depending on your choice of interventions you might have heard instructional control described in terms such as, compliance training, developing a master/apprentice relationship, or earning your child’s respect. Regardless of what type of intervention you use with your child, you are not going to be able to teach your child everything you want him to learn if you do not earn his willingness to follow your lead.

Depending on whose version of the approach to intervention you are studying you likely have been given some ideas about how to gain instructional control with your child. It usually involves pairing yourself with reinforcement and slowly adding simple instructions to the play. These instructions are usually for things that your child is likely to already want to do. Since he wants to follow these directions you can easily reinforce this direction following with more fun and reinforcing items. Over time you begin to increase the amount and difficulty of the instructions as your child becomes more willing to work for the reinforcing items and activities you are offering. For some children this is all that it takes to begin to develop a good working relationship. However for the vast majority of children with autism this technique is grossly insufficient to help them overcome the allure of their current, “I say It, Mom and Dad does it” lifestyle.

To better help our families develop a lasting relationship of instructional control, I began to pioneer my own guidelines based on the methods we used to resolve the problems families were still having due to the weaknesses of normal instructional control procedures. These guidelines eventually became a series of seven steps that allow parents to enlist the environment as an ally in their battle against autism.

Once you have systematically applied these seven steps your child’s environment, you will no longer need to actively control your child. Your child’s natural desires will become

his motivation to participate in joint activities, follow instructions and share in the responsibility of maintaining social interactions. He will begin making the choice to actively engage in increasingly more difficult tasks because you have earned his desire to maintain your interaction. It is only when your child is making the independent choice to maintain and prolong your interactions that you can begin teaching beyond the limits of what he was formerly willing to learn.

The seven steps work because they act as a barrier, blocking off your child's access to unearned reinforcement. This leaves items and activities that act as reinforcement available for you to apply them to the behaviors you actually want to increase. However, the failure to adhere to even one of the following seven steps can upset the entire balance and your child will likely be able to find a way to avoid the benefits of your teaching.

1. Show your child that you are the one in control of the items he wants to hold or play with and that you will decide when he can have them.

Anything your child prefers to do or play with while he is alone is potential reinforcement for his positive behavior choices. Your control over these items is essential in the early stages of earning instructional control. Your child should not be deprived of prized objects. Rather, he should be expected to earn time with them by following simple instructions and behaving appropriately.

The best way to use control of your child's reinforcement to teach is to begin deciding what items your child can have in his environment and what he can do to cause you to introduce or remove them. To restrict reinforcement, begin by removing preferred items from your child's room and the remainder of the house. Put these objects in a place where they can be seen but not accessed by your child. At the very least, make sure that your child knows where they are now being kept. A clear container should suffice for younger children. A locked room or a locked cabinet in the child's room may be needed for older children.

Restriction of reinforcement becomes more important once you begin working with your child. Whenever you see him put down a reinforcing item you must immediately put it away. If he walks over and begins to play with, hold, or look at something that you haven't thought to restrict, take note of that item and when he is finished remove it from the environment. This way you can reintroduce it as a possible reinforcer. If your child has favorite activities, consider ways that you can control these as well. Mini-trampolines can be hung against the wall, window shades can be closed and swings can be lifted up and out of reach when not in use.

2. Show your child that you are fun. Make each interaction you have with him an enjoyable experience so that he will want to follow your directions to earn more time sharing experiences with you.

In the best ABA/VB Programs approximately 75% of every interaction you have with your child should be reserved for the process of pairing yourself with fun activities and known reinforcement. Pairing activities should be led by your child's motivation and should include mostly non-verbal and declarative language. You should practice sharing your thoughts and ideas with your child in silly and exciting ways without requiring

anything in return. What is he showing you about what he desires? To pair yourself with reinforcement, follow your child around and when he shows interest in things play along with him. Make his playtime more fun because you are a part of it. If your child wants music, you should be the one to provide the music. In addition, you could hold him, bounce and dance with him while he is listening. It is perfectly okay to turn off the music when he chooses to leave the area or begins to play or behave inappropriately (step 1). However, it is important, especially in the early stages of instructional control, to demonstrate that you will immediately turn it back on as soon as he returns or ceases the inappropriate activity. You should always work to increase his level of enjoyment beyond what he would be capable of on his own. Be careful not to take any fun out of the item. This is sometimes more difficult than you think. If playing with your child is not something you are particularly good at you should practice. Good pairing is essential to good teaching.

3. Show your child that you can be trusted. Always say what you mean and mean what you say. If you say your child should do something, don't allow him access to reinforcement until it has been acceptably completed. This includes prompting him to completion if necessary.

Words are normally not consequences. They are threats of consequences. If you do not stick to your word your child will have no basis from which to make good decisions. During teaching time, do not reward your child for avoiding learning by letting your instruction remain unfulfilled. When you present a direction or instruction formally known as a discriminative stimulus or SD, you should expect your child to choose to satisfy that request. Until he decides to make that choice you must not allow him to experience any additional reinforcement. Not allowing other choices to be reinforced will make the choice you are trying to teach in your child's best interest. When positive learning behavior is in your child's best interest he will choose it sooner and more often.

Consider your choice of words carefully. If you ask your child a question, he should be allowed to answer it and you must respect his decision even if it gets in the way of teaching. This means you have to think about the possible responses before you ask the question. For example, you have asked your child if he wants to work with you and he answers "no." Your child has not made an inappropriate response. In fact, you offered your child an option to work or not to work. He has opted not to work. You must realize that it was your decision to ask a question that caused the problem. You can avoid this by using specific language. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Tell your child exactly what you want him to do by direct instruction or SD. When you say to your child, "Sit down," "Come to me," or "Do this" you should always expect your child to respond with an appropriate choice (this may need to be prompted). If you have a ball that your child wants to play with and you tell him to sit down, you should not give him that ball until he is seated. If he does not take his seat, withhold the ball until he makes a better choice. Remember, you should only be giving instructions like these during 25% of the time you are not playing and pairing yourself with reinforcement so the process of meaning what you say and saying what you mean is not a constant burden on your child's desires.

4. Show your child that following your directions is to his benefit and the best way for him to obtain what he wants. Give your child easy directions as often as

possible and then reinforce his decisions to participate by following them with good experiences.

Once you have established control over your child's reinforcers you can begin using them to support his appropriate behavior choices. To follow this step appropriately you need to be aware of Premack's Principle. In the case of teaching your child this principle means that he must follow a direction and/or demonstrate an appropriate behavior, before you allow him to have something he wants. The best way to ensure that your child adheres to this principle is to make a request or issue an instruction to your child before giving him anything that he might want from you. Your direction can be anything related or useful such as asking that he, "Throw that in the garbage" or "Sit down and I'll get it for you." It could also be to ask for a simple motor imitation first as a way to develop a teaching give and take. The more opportunities your child is reinforced with something he wants after first following a direction or demonstrating an appropriate behavior, the quicker he will learn that following rules and directions is the best way to get to what he desires.

Resist the temptation to ask your child if he wants something before you give him a requirement to meet in order to get it. You also want to stay away from "If _____, then _____" statements such as "If you put away your Legos I will give you some Ice Cream." These statements are shortcuts to getting what you want from your child but they are fraught with limitations and potential problems. It is always better to surprise your child with an item or action of your informed choosing after he has made a positive choice. The use of "If, then" statements does not translate into better choice making for your child. Instead it invites him to begin negotiating with you.

To quickly get through the early phases of earning instructional control, provide your child with hundreds of opportunities a day to make an appropriate choice based on a direction. Then you need to immediately reinforce this positive choice. Once you have taken control over his reinforcement, providing him with opportunities to follow directions will be easy. Since you have access to his favorite items under your control your child must come to you to obtain what he wants. When he does, you only need to ask him to do something first.

5. In the early stages of earning instructional control with your child reinforce after each positive response moving to an ever increasing variable ratio of reinforcement.

Consistency is important because your child must understand that certain behavior choices result in his coming in contact with something he values. This understanding of good choices leading to good things mirrors the realities of all of our lives and will only occur if in the beginning every good choice is met with a positive result. Because many of these choices are based on the SD's (instructions) you have given him, he will begin to see following these instructions as a necessary component to gaining good things as well. The connection of instructions, leading to good choice making, leading to reinforcement is not lost on a child who is very good at getting what he wants. As your child learns that it is in his best interest to attend to your directions and give good responses he will start to apply the necessary effort to focusing on what you want from him. Ultimately, he will begin to come to you looking for an SD (instruction) because he

knows this is the first step to getting to his favorite things. This awareness of the importance of others is one of the first steps toward autism recovery and will only begin to occur if you consistently make following directions the best and fastest way that your child can meet with reinforcement. That means reinforce every single correct response.

In the beginning don't let a good response of any kind pass without meeting some form of reinforcement. There is always some form of reinforcement available to you perhaps a tickle, a swing in the air, or a long loving deep pressure hug. Later when your child is willing and able to follow your directions consistently you can begin to thin out the ratio of reinforcement. In the beginning, every time you reinforce a behavior you are making a statement that this is a behavior you want to see again in similar circumstances. Once your child understands this, he will also recognize that when you do not reinforce a behavior it is because you would not like to see that behavior again.

Once earned, instructional control can be maintained by slowly thinning out the amount of reinforcement through an increase in the response – reinforcement ratio. As your child's willingness to participate in learning improves move from a reinforcement ratio of one to a variable ratio (VR) of two or three. This means that on the average you will follow every two to three responses with tangible reinforcement. Next, you can move to a VR-5 and eventually a variable ratio of ten or more. The reason we use a variable ratio schedule of reinforcement is due to scientific study that has demonstrated it more effective in evoking consistent and strong responding than set schedules.

6. Demonstrate that you know your child's priorities as well as your own.

Track and record each of your child's favorite reinforcing items and activities. Then observe which he prefers in different situations. Make a list of his current reinforcers and share this list with all the adults who regularly interact with your child. Everyday you should try to find or develop a new reinforcer or two. Your child needs to be able to work for a wide variety of reinforcement. Always rotate reinforcers to keep from diluting the reinforcing value of any one item. It is also a good idea to save your child's most valued items and activities to be used as reinforcers for difficult or important skills such as language acquisition or toilet training.

In addition to knowing what your child wants you must also remain aware of your priorities. What is the most important thing for you to be teaching your child? Normally, when you work with your child you will have several different goals in mind at any one time. When this is the case, it is possible that a single behavior choice your child makes may be appropriate for one goal you are trying to meet but inappropriate for another. In these cases you need to know what target goals are your priorities. If your goal is to pair with your child you might respond to a behavior differently than if you are trying to focus on instructional control or skill acquisition. There is seldom only one correct way to respond to a behavior choice your child makes. It is important to know what your priorities are at any given time and make reinforcement choices based on these priorities.

7. Show your child that ignoring your instructions or choosing inappropriate behavior will not result in the acquisition of reinforcement.

This is sometimes the most difficult step to perform correctly and having a good Behavioral Consultant (preferably someone who is Board Certified) available to offer you guidance is recommended.

Never allow your child to meet with reinforcement when he hasn't followed a direction or engages in an inappropriate behavior. You must consistently recognize when your child is behaving inappropriately and intentionally make that behavior unsuccessful. You do this simply by not reinforcing it. The way that we do this is by applying a consequence called extinction. When your child decides to leave the teaching setting, make sure he understands that his choice has no controlling effect on you. This can be best done through declarative statements such as, "I guess we are done playing," "Oh well," or "Bye." Non-Verbal reactions are also beneficial and important. Gather your teaching and reinforcing materials and walk to another part of the room. Divert your eye contact and/or turn your body away from your child. Continue to play with the items either by yourself or with other siblings. Make sure that your child has no access to your reinforcing objects and actions (or outside reinforcement) until he returns to finish the activity he left. This encourages your child to make a conscious choice to follow your direction and return to participate in joint learning activities. Letting your child go and waiting until he chooses to come back is a much farther reaching option than trying to pull or hold him there against his will. Pulling your child to work increases your child's motivation to escape. For your teaching to be as productive as possible, he must decide that it is in his best interest to learn from you. Do not force this decision. Instead, set up the environment so that learning from you is your child's most beneficial option and then give him the opportunity to realize it. Even if in the first several days you feel like most of your time is spent waiting and not teaching, stay strong. You are teaching. What your child is learning during this waiting period is more valuable than the unmotivated work you would otherwise be doing. What he is learning to do is desire participation in your teaching. By following these steps comprehensively you will find that your waiting time will begin to quickly reduce and the level of motivated learning your child does will far surpass any you have achieved in the past. In our work we have found that children who choose to rejoin the teaching process due to a comprehensive application of the seven steps of instructional control are far less likely to leave it again. When they do leave your teaching it will be for increasingly shorter periods of time. In many cases children can become so motivated to be a part of learning with you that they begin initiating teaching settings. It is only through this motivated learning that children are able to reach skill levels that were thought to be out of reach in the past.

The reason you use extinction as a tool of instructional control is that it is an extremely powerful way to reduce problematic behavior. Steps one through six are designed to help increase frequency and quality of your child's positive behavior choices. When used correctly, these steps make life immediately easier for you and your child. He is following directions and participating in positive interactions with you and subsequently you are playfully giving him all of his favorite things. It is this part of instructional control that we want to spend the most time in as it is usually filled with joy and laughter.

Conversely, the benefits of extinction procedures are not immediate. The results occur over time and exist in the absence of reinforcement. However, this seventh step of instructional control must come into play whenever your child makes a choice that you do not want to see again.

Extinction allows you to reduce problem behavior without the need for aversive punishment procedures. You need to realize however that extinction always comes with a cost; the extinction burst. An extinction burst is the period during which a behavior on extinction intensifies and/or increases before it will finally decrease. The extinction burst will be composed of behavior more severe than the one you are trying to extinguish. Initial periods of extinction burst may be long and difficult to endure. The danger of extinction is the consequences that come with giving in and reinforcing extinction burst behaviors. If your child's extinction burst behaviors are successful in gaining what he wants these behaviors will actually increase in the future. So it is extremely important that when you choose extinction that you remain committed to following through with it. This means not reinforcing your child until he has followed your original instruction or chosen an appropriate replacement behavior to the one you want to reduce. However, even with this possible danger of reinforcing the extinction burst, extinction remains the best way to reduce inappropriate behavior choices and convince your child that following your instructions is the fastest and easiest way to getting what he wants. It is only through overcoming each extinction burst with your child that you will ever fully earn instructional control and develop a good working relationship with him.

Extinction bursts will quickly begin to decrease in duration and veracity as your child realizes that the benefit of using these inappropriate behaviors no longer exists.

Using extinction to reduce problem behavior can be a powerful tool but used inconsistently it has the potential to be as damaging as it is beneficial. When used correctly it can reduce extreme behavior choices in a matter of days or weeks. However, if you are not fully prepared to ride out all extinction bursts along the way, you will end up increasing the duration and severity of these behavior choices you are trying to extinguish. It is for this reason that I strongly suggest that you learn how to apply this seventh step under the guidance of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst whenever possible.

Unfortunately, avoiding extinction is not a worthwhile option. Parents, teachers, and therapists sometimes avoid using extinction because of the fact that in the beginning stages extinction bursts can be severe and disruptive. Extinction can be scary and difficult when you do not know how to most effectively perform the procedure. If you allow yourself to avoid using extinction because you fear extinction burst behaviors you will likely be able to avoid your child's use of those behaviors in the short term. However, you will not remove the extinction burst behaviors from your child's repertoire. In fact, you will only be delaying their use until you can no longer accept the growing severity of your child's inappropriate behavior choices. Your child will not learn that extinction burst behaviors will not be effective until he has tried them enough times without success.

In addition to the process of gaining instructional control with your child, incorporating these steps into your family lifestyle will ensure that a positive working relationship is maintained. The more capable parents and therapists become regarding these seven steps, the better and faster their children will begin to choose positive learning behaviors on a regular basis. My experiences have also shown that each subsequent person to earn instructional control with a child will help make the process quicker and

easier for the next. Thus, when you and your spouse can earn instructional control it will be easier for grandma and grandpa. In turn, grandma and grandpa's successes will make it even easier for your child's school therapist and teacher to earn instructional control with your child.