

Using Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) at Home Article 2: Motivation

No. 73, November 2013

By: Teal Shirk-Luckett, School Support Consultant-Autism Spectrum Disorder, Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca

Motivation to learn was the initial area targeted by researchers as they began to think about pivotal areas of development for children with ASD (Koegel, R.L. & Koegel, L.K., 2012). Using the strategies described below, care providers are able to teach children with ASD how performing and learning new skills will help them gain access to desired materials and activities in their environment.

Within the pivotal area of motivation there are several elements to consider: child-choice, reinforcing attempts, natural reinforcement, interspersing tasks, and varying tasks.

Child choice/child lead OR shared control

In PRT the child chooses the materials, location, topics and/or toys. The caregiver follows the child's lead within the activity while focusing on a skill they wish to teach. Many studies have demonstrated increased skill development, productivity, increased interest and enthusiasm when the child's choice was used while teaching (Koegel, L.K., Koegel, R.L., Harrower, & Carter, 1999, p179).

Within any activity, some level of choice can be given to your child. Once your child has made their choice, you can focus on the skill you want to teach within that choice.

Children can choose:

- What clothes they wear (talking, communication, independent dressing),
- which item to put on first (communication, independent dressing),

- To walk or skip to the car (successful transitions),
- To do homework on the coffee table or their desk (homework completion),
- Which writing/drawing implement to use (labeling objects/colours/prepositions, drawing or writing tasks),
- What recipe to make for dinner (self-help, cooking, family chores)
- To use a fork or spoon (self-feeding),
- Which toy/book to play/look at (learning new words, attending to person or object, reading, learning the alphabet, turn taking etc.)
- And so on.

Interspersed tasks

Children with ASD show the skill they are learning more and appear happier when new skills are mixed with things they do well (Dunlop, 1984; Dunlop & Koegel, 1980, Koegel & Koegel, 1986, Koegel & Johnson, 1989 as cited in Koegel, L.K. et al., 1999, p179). Therefore, PRT uses a lot of acquired skills mixed with the new skills. This can also lead to less "escape behaviour" (Koegel, L.K., et al., 1999, p 179). For example if your child is working on colours, after they ask for a specific coloured crayon, you should ask them to do other tasks that are known or easy.

If you were teaching your child to cook, you might first teach them to find their favourite recipe. Then you might ask them to do things that are easy. Instead of asking them to get out all the ingredients, you might ask them each one separately. "Get the macaroni from the top shelf". Next you could ask another skill you want to

teach. "Please grate this block of cheese"; reinforcing the cheese grating with a bite of freshly grated cheese. You would continue in this way mixing tasks they can easily do with something you want them to learn.

Task variation while teaching

Children with ASD are thought to have difficulty using the skills they learn in different places, or with different materials or people. Some learners are able to perform a skill only if it is presented exactly as it was taught. PRT deals with this challenge by using different materials, people and places while teaching skills. Varying the activities, skills being taught and reinforcers also keep the child (and adult) interested (Koegel, R. L. & Koegel, L.K., 2012, p48 & 58-59). It has been shown that when activities are varied, the child is happier and learns faster (Dunlop and Koegel, R.L., 1980; as cited in Koegel, R. L. & Koegel, L.K., 2012, p58). In the colouring example, colours may also be taught when choosing what to wear, sorting dirty clothing, choosing foods, cars or other toys to play with, bath toys and so on. While drawing you may also teach specific drawing skills, labeling pictures or objects, saying "yes" or "no" and so on.

Reinforce attempts

Reinforcing the child when they truly try to do the right thing increases their desire to try the next time. The child gets what they want only when they correctly attempt the skill you are teaching. R.L. Koegel, O'Dell & Dunlap showed that nonverbal children with ASD talked more often more quickly when their attempts to talk were rewarded (1988, as cited in Koegel, R. L. & Koegel, L.K., 2012, p56).

Any true attempt at doing the right thing is reinforced. If the child is trying, but is not correct or has done better before, they still are reinforced. While colouring, if your child reached for the red crayon, looked at you and said "rrr" they would get the crayon even if they had once said "red crayon". If your child said "red crayon" with his hands in his lap while looking at the floor he would not get the crayon. He had not truly tried to communicate with you.

Naturalistic/direct reinforcement

Natural reinforcers are directly related to the activity. When your child tries to do the skill you are teaching, you give them something they want that is part of the activity. Skills that are reinforced in this way are learned faster by children with ASD than skills that are reinforced with something the child wants, but is not related to the skill. For example, when working on colours your child could ask for a red crayon and then get the red crayon (getting the crayon reinforces asking for it). Your child gets to eat their favourite meal for dinner after they tried some of the cooking tasks. They also may get small bites as they try to grate the cheese or drain the pasta water.

Using these strategies, you can motivate your child to engage in the learning process with you while continuing in their daily activities and routines. Including these motivational principles into an intervention approach "significantly improves language, academic and social functioning, while simultaneously decreasing disruptive behaviour" (Koegel, R.L., Koegel, L.K & McNerney, E.K., 2001, p22). Once a child is motivated to learn, and caregivers are comfortable implementing these strategies, the child can then be taught to self-initiate learning opportunities.

DISCLAIMER: This document reflects the views of the author. It is Autism Ontario's intent to inform and educate. Every situation is unique and while we hope this information is useful, it should be used in the context of broader considerations for each person. Please contact Autism Ontario at info@autismontario.com or 416-246-9592 for permission to reproduce this material for any purpose other than personal use. © 2013 Autism Ontario 416.246.9592 www.autismontario.com