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**CENTER FOR AUTISM  
AND RELATED  
DISABILITIES**



# FACT SHEET – INCIDENTAL TEACHING

## Incidental Teaching

Incidental teaching is a strategy that uses the principles of applied behavior analysis (ABA) to provide structured learning opportunities in the natural environment by using the child’s interests and natural motivation. Incidental teaching is an especially useful approach with young children. In incidental teaching, the teacher or parent follows the lead of the child in selecting the activity or situation in which the learning opportunities will occur. Once the teacher identifies a naturally occurring situation that a child is expressing interest in, strategies are then used to encourage the child’s responses. Incidental teaching strategies are designed to promote motivation and facilitate generalization.

## Optimizing Learning Opportunities in the Natural Environment

**1. Follow the Child’s Lead:** A parent can enhance engagement by determining the child’s current interests. Identify the materials, actions, and objects that are motivating to the child at a given time. The object or activity of interest should be at the child’s developmental level. Be aware that children’s interests are constantly changing. Rather than introducing a toy the child has previously shown interest in, it is better to go with what the child is already playing with.

Example: If a child is playing with a toy bus and a parent is interested in working on identifying colors, the parent should not replace the bus with a stack of flashcards. Instead, the parent can make a game using the child’s current interest in the toy bus. The child can practice colors by identifying the color of the bus and identifying the colors of figurines before picking each one up in the toy bus.

**2. Attention:** If a child is not attending to an adult’s requests, it is unlikely that there will be a successful response. Therefore, it is important to ensure the adult has the child’s attention before initiating anything that requires a response. Adults should position themselves to maximize face-to-face interactions. Getting close and at eye-level helps the child focus and understand that something is expected. Doing something unexpected or taking a turn with a desired toy can also increase a child’s attention.

**3. Environmental Arrangements:** Since activities follow the lead of the child, it is important for the **adult to have some control over the environment**. This enables shared control: if a child wants access to a particular toy or activity, the child must first go through the adult. Placing a desired item out of reach (but still within view) creates an opportunity for the child to request. Similarly, only offering a small amount increases the likelihood that the child will

request again, when more is desired. Organizing the environment and adjusting the amount of visual, auditory, or sensory stimuli can enable the child to function without getting overloaded.

Example: An adult organizes the playroom so that toys are enclosed in clear bins and separated by category. In order to gain access to toys the child must request help from the adult. Only one bin is opened at a time, so the child is not over-stimulated by a floor filled of toys, thus engagement in a particular toy is enhanced.

- 4. Time Delay:** After making an initiation or request, the adult should wait for the child's response. This pause allows time for processing and gives the child an opportunity to initiate. While waiting, the adult can encourage the child to respond using non-verbal cues such as an expectant look, exaggerated expression, or use of body language. If the non-verbal cues alone do not lead the child to respond independently, the adult can model the correct response or use additional prompts.
- 5. Model Correct Response:** The adult demonstrates words, phrases, and/or gestures about the objects and activities the child is interested in and pauses with an expectant look, allowing the child to imitate. This clearly shows what the child should do or say in order to get what is desired.  
  
Example: A child is struggling to reach a bag of chips. The adult crouches down to the eye-level of the child and makes an inquisitive face. If the child does not request independently, the adult models the desired response, "Chips." The child then requests "chips."
- 6. Contingent Reinforcement:** Reinforcement should only be offered when the child displays a desired response. In the previous example the adult would offer the chips following the child's request. If the child did not imitate, "chips" and instead began to whine, the adult should not allow access to chips. Any attempts and approximations should also be reinforced. If the child does not say "chips" but instead points and says "ip," the adult should offer the child a chip to reinforce efforts.
- 7. Repetition:** Children require multiple opportunities to practice a skill that is being learned. This repetition may be back to back when initially learning a skill, and later becomes dispersed throughout the day to promote independence. Environmental arrangements also contribute to creating opportunities for repetition. Offering only small amounts ensures that the child will repeat the interaction and request more. Also, interrupting play with turns can allow for repetition.
- 8. Vary the Difficulty:** One last thing to consider when optimizing learning opportunities in the natural environment is maintaining motivation. Following the child's lead ensures the child's interest, but varying the difficulty by offering some tasks that are less difficult maintains motivation. A child who experiences success while also being challenged is more likely to continue. Interspersing difficult tasks with relatively easy components limits frustrations, creates more opportunities to get reinforcers, and promotes successful interactions.

## Suggested Readings

McGee, G.G., Morrier, M.J., & Daly, T. (1999). An incidental teaching approach to early intervention for toddlers with autism. *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 24 (3), 133-146.

<http://www.spiesforparents.cpd.usu.edu/Start.htm>