

Great Beginnings

by
Tracy Vail, MS, CCC/SLP

It's critical to begin and develop the therapeutic relationship very carefully. It's critical that the child continue to enjoy being with people and see learning as a "good thing"!

The first job of the instructor is to teach the child that when they show up, good things happen! In behavioral terms, you must "pair yourself with reinforcers". This can be accomplished in many ways but the primary way is to carefully observe the child and interact with him in a way he finds enjoyable. Observe how he likes to be touched, what kinds of voices he enjoys, how he responds to different facial expressions, what toys he prefers to play with. Approach him when he appears bored and unconditionally offer him something he enjoys. Play with him without requiring any responding. It's sometimes helpful to have a "special" food or toy that's only available when the instructor is present. This establishes the instructor as a form of "conditioned reinforcer". You'll know that you are being successful if the child appears happy when you arrive! Important factors to consider at this stage include:

- a) Don't remove the child from an enjoyable activity when the instructor arrives. For example, it would be best not to have a favorite video on just before the instructor is scheduled to come!
- b) Don't require a response. In other words, don't give the child any directions to "come here", "sit down", "look at this" etc..
- c) Interact in an animated and fun way to make the child WANT to be with you.

Requiring the first response

Using the Verbal Behavior model, the most important thing to teach the child is how to ask for things they want. (Manding) This is because the child is typically motivated to communicate for these things (has an "establishing operation"). We typically see a big "jump" in communication skills as a child learns to mand. They learn "I talk, I get" and that gives them a great deal of power. Part of this teaching should already be occurring during the first stage. For example, if you see a child reach for a specific toy (car), you might say, "car". Hold onto the car for just a second to see if he will echo. If not, give the car anyway. If the child does not have an echoic response under instructional control, you might also try getting a fill-in response that can later be transferred to a mand. You might say, "Let's play cars!" the repeat, "Let's play ___" and see if the child will fill-in the response. Another useful technique is to have the desired item in view but unattainable without adult assistance and give the child a choice as the adult labels each. "Did you want car or book?" If the child does not respond even if you know he is able to say the word, it may be necessary to teach the child to be cooperative with other imitative activities as you're teaching verbal mands. The following factors are important to consider when beginning to require responses:

- a) Never require a response that you can't prompt- For example, don't say "Say car" while holding the car if the child does not consistently imitate. This is because we can't physically "make him" say the word. We don't want the child to practice NOT following instructions.
- b) If you give an instruction, such as "sit down", you must physically guide the child to sit down if he does not do so. Again, we don't want him to practice NOT following instructions.



- c) Be sure the first instructions you give are those that you are sure the child is capable to performing and reinforce heavily for compliance. First response requirements might be non-verbal imitation, “come here” (with another adult present to prompt) “sit down”, “touch ___”, match something, put a puzzle piece in etc.
- d) Never use a reinforcer as a “bribe”. This means, in essence, teasing the child by holding a reinforcer in full view and requiring a response before you give the child access to it. This does not mean that you can’t use reinforcers as a “promise”. For example, if you want the child to come over to you, have something he likes in your hand and give it to him when he comes!
- e) Even for children who are vocal but these vocals are not yet under instructional control, pictures or signs may be helpful in teaching the child how to request things they can say(mand). This is because you can prompt a child to perform a sign or hand over a picture but you can’t physically prompt speech. Typically, the child will quickly begin to use words functionally, if he is capable of producing them, once he understands the “rule” of manding (requesting).

Dealing with Negative Behavior

The child should never gain access to a reinforcer with negative behavior. This is often difficult at the beginning of a therapeutic relationship because, sometimes, the child may have been inadvertently reinforced for negative behavior. It’s common for children to cry and scream when they have a need that is not being met. Because the child is unable to communicate in more effective ways, parents may have tried to figure out what the child wants when he is screaming by offering all of his favored items. This reinforces the screaming and tantruming! Ignoring the tantrum may temporarily increase the behavior (extinction burst) but it’s critical that all those working with the child not “give in” to the tantruming behavior. Try to give no attention to the tantrum if the child is screaming because he wants something. Walk away, take a deep breath, and stay calm! When the child calms down, use pictures, signs or show him things until you figure out what he wants. If you are aware of what the child wants, a counting procedure can be used. Say, “No crying” or a something similar and begin counting when the child stops crying, even if it’s to take a breath at first. Start over each time the child begins to cry again. Once the child has stopped crying for a count up to a pre-determined number (3-10), give the child what he wants.

If the child is tantruming because you have delivered an instruction and he does not want to comply, calmly use the least intrusive prompt that you can to make sure he does as he was told. If you’ve asked him to sit and he screams, guide him gently to the chair, make him sit for a few seconds then let him get up (ONLY when he is not screaming!). The important thing about negative behavior is to learn from it. If the child is tantruming, it means the teaching procedures must be adjusted. Look at the reinforcers, the density of the reinforcement, and the difficulty of the tasks you are asking him to do in order to determine what needs to be adjusted. It’s critical that negative behaviors are not reinforced but the most desirable thing to do is to use good teaching procedures so they do not occur.

The most critical things to remember at the beginning of a therapeutic relationship are to have fun, enjoy the child, and teach the child that learning is fun and communication is powerful! The child must learn that life gets better when he complies with requests!

