

Naturalistic Instruction Practices

Naturalistic instruction practices are used during everyday classroom activities to support and encourage child engagement in child-initiated activities and child behavioral elaborations in the activities. Teachers can promote child participation and learning in everyday classroom activities by providing interest-based activities, responding positively to children’s initiations, and interacting in ways that encourage children to build on and expand their current capabilities.

Learning Guide: Using Responsive, Naturalistic Learning Opportunities

- Observe children in different everyday classroom activities to identify child capabilities and interests. Determine the various behavior a child uses to participate in classroom activities and routines. Also determine child preferences and likes for toys, materials, people, activities, and actions.
- Provide opportunities for each child to participate frequently in a variety of activities that match his or her interests and capabilities. Make available toys and materials that are likely to capture the child’s attention and encourage participation. Provide children many opportunities to initiate interactions with toys, materials, peers, and adults while participating in the activities.
- During interest-based activities, notice the child’s focus of attention. Pay particular attention to when and how the child tries to interact with objects or people in the activities. When the child initiates a behavior, respond promptly and positively to him or her. You might smile, laugh, or otherwise show your enthusiasm and pleasure with the child’s behavior. Or join in and take turns with the child, imitate the child’s behavior and actions, acknowledge the child’s behavior, make positive comments, or provide descriptive praise.
- Encourage the child to stay engaged in the activities by continuing to provide materials of interest and by responding promptly to his or her initiations. Provide the child enough time to initiate a behavior. Match the pace and intensity of your responses to the child’s behavior.
- Consider the child’s characteristics and provide adaptations and supports (supported seating, enlarged utensil handles, etc.) that could help the child sustain participation in an activity.
- Respond to the child’s behavior in ways that encourage the child to elaborate or expand on his or her current abilities. You might add materials, ask an open-ended question, make suggestions, model a new behavior, or provide physical assistance, all in ways that extend what the child is doing. Provide the child many opportunities throughout the day to use newly learned behaviors.

Watch a video of this Learning Guide

You’ll know the practice is working if ...

- Children stay engaged in everyday classroom activities
- Children more often initiate interactions with toys, materials, and other children and adults
- Children acquire and use new competencies during everyday classroom activities

A Quick Peek



Anna observed the children in the preschool classroom and noticed Joy holding one of her favorite dolls. After Anna saw Joy hug a nearby toy dog several times, she joined Joy, picked up the dog, and had it hug the doll in return. Joy giggled and danced the doll about, and Anna imitated with the dog. Back and forth they went, with Anna imitating Joy and the doll. Anna used the dog to encourage Joy to talk, having the dog ask the doll engaging questions (e.g., “What is your name?” “What do you like to do?”). Joy had her doll answer each of the questions. When Anna had the dog ask, “What are you going to do today?”, Joy moved the doll to face all around the room, naming the different available activities and listing her own favorite activities. Then Anna’s dog enthusiastically named several other children who loved those same activities and suggested, “Do you think they would like to play?” Joy had her doll bounce up and down and shout, “Yes!” She jumped up and approached her friend, Renni, who eagerly grabbed another doll to join in the play.

Learn more about naturalistic instruction from early childhood colleagues and from online resources such as this article:

[Responsive Teaching: Early intervention for children with Down syndrome and other disabilities](#)