

Teaching Your Child Specific Behaviors

Parents have the opportunity to teach their children in so many different ways. When you want to help your young child learn a very specific behavior, you can achieve success using a well-planned, focused teaching method called Systematic Instruction. Using this method can be a rewarding way to help your child learn new behavior, acquire a new skill, and learn how to use it in different activities and with different people.

See a video of this Learning Guide

Learning Guide: Teaching New Behavior Systematically

- Start by identifying something you want your child to learn. Choose something that you can observe your child doing and that would help your child participate in everyday activities. A single, simple action—such as grasping a spoon—or something that requires several different skills—such as washing hands—are good choices for systematic teaching.
- Next, find a positive, interesting response (consequence) your child will enjoy when he or she does the new behavior or skill. This can be something you know your child will find interesting and that will make him or her happy. Keep in mind your child's special interests; favorite things to do; and preferences for toys, people, and activities to help you pinpoint a response that will especially motivate and reward your child.
- Identify a few activities that could give your child opportunities to learn to use the new behavior or skill followed by an interesting, rewarding response. Involve your child in one of these activities. Get your child's attention and let him or her know a learning time is starting.
- Encourage your child to do the new behavior or skill by saying something helpful (such as "Try using both hands"), using gestures (such as pointing to a correct choice), showing an action or behavior (such as pushing a toy truck), or physically helping your child to do the action (such as by placing your hand over your child's hand and doing the action together). Provide only as much help as necessary for your child to be successful.
- Each time your child does or tries to do the new behavior or skill, immediately provide the interesting response you selected. It is best to use responses that naturally occur as part of the activity. For example, reaching out for a book brings the rewarding response of getting to nestle in mom's lap and listen to a story.
- As your child learns the new behavior or skill, give him or her less and less help. Provide the interesting response each time your child does the new behavior until he or she can use the behavior on his or her own. As your child learns the new behavior or skill, provide the response less frequently.
- Give your child lots of opportunities to use the new behavior or skill in different activities and with different people and materials. Make sure there are many naturally occurring responses available to your child by involving him or her in interesting activities and with interesting toys and people.



A Quick Peek

Sandy watched the things her daughter, Maisie, did in different activities and noticed that she would be better able to get toys and other things she wanted if she could reach for them. Sandy knew that Maisie loved it when Sandy tickled her. Sandy planned to help Maisie learn to reach for a tickle during their morning play time together. Sandy sat in front of Maisie and waited until Maisie looked at her. She wiggled her fingers and said, "Reach for Mama's fingers." As Maisie smiled, Sandy wiggled her fingers again and moved them closer. She used her other hand to help Maisie reach and immediately tickled Maisie's hand. They played this game many times, with Sandy tickling Maisie's hand each time Sandy helped her reach. Soon Sandy only had to wiggle her fingers before Maisie tried to reach for her. When Maisie was reaching well, Sandy started giving Maisie lots of chances to reach for other things in other activities to get a tickle. Even on an afternoon hike, Maisie laughed as she anticipated the tickle she would get when she reached for a blade of grass Sandy had picked.

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

- Your child is interested in and stays involved in the teaching activity
- Your child learns the new behavior or skill you identified
- Your child uses the new behavior or skill without help in different activities and with different people and toys/materials

Learn more about systematic instructional practices from your child's teacher or early interventionist or from online resources such as [*Using the System of Least to Most Prompts*](#) by C. J. Fields.