

Teaching New Behaviors with Systematic Instruction

You have lots of opportunities and ways to teach your child. When you want to help your young child learn a specific behavior, you can achieve success using a teaching method called “systematic instruction”.

Systematic instruction can be a rewarding way to help your child learn new behaviors, acquire new skills, and learn to use what they’ve learned in different activities and with different people.



DEC Recommended Practices: Instruction 1, 2, 5–7, 10, 12, 13

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ecta Early Childhood
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Systematic Instruction from Start to Finish

- Start by choosing 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. It might be a single, simple action (for example, grasping a spoon). It might also be something that requires several different skills (for example, washing hands). Either type will work with systematic teaching.
- Next, choose a positive, interesting response your child will enjoy when they perform the new behavior or skill. Choose something you know your child will find interesting, and that will make them happy. Use what you know about your child’s interests, favorite things to do, and preferences for toys, people, and activities to help you choose a response that will motivate and reward them.
- Identify a few activities that could give your child opportunities to learn to use the new behavior or skill, and where you can use interesting, rewarding response you chose. Involve your child in one of these activities, gain their attention, and let them know it is time for learning.
- Encourage your child to do the new behavior or skill by saying something helpful (“Try using both hands!”), using gestures (pointing to a correct choice), showing an action or behavior (pushing a toy truck), or physically helping your child to do the action (place your hand over theirs and do the action together). Provide only the help they need to be successful.
- Each time your child tries or succeeds at 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 your lap and listen to a story.
- As your child learns the new behavior or skill, provide less help. Continue providing the interesting response each time your child does the new behavior until they can use it on their own. As your child learns the new behavior or skill, you can provide the response less frequently.
- Give your child plenty of opportunity to use the new behavior or skill in different activities and with different people and materials. Make sure there are several naturally occurring responses available to your child by involving them 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.

Sandy 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 she helped Maisie 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.

Signs of Success

- 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 or materials



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