



The Home Visitor's Role in Working with the Child with Autism and The Family

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How to assist families who have a child newly diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a common challenge for the home visitor. Current recommended practice informs us that using a combination of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) strategies is a very efficacious approach. ABA does not refer to a program but a set of behavioral principles (e.g., discrete trial, structured teaching, and incidental teaching are just a few terms often used). The combinations of approaches under the ABA umbrella are tailored for each individual child's needs.

Applying ABA strategies in early intervention sounds impossible given the once-a-week nature of most home-based intervention programs; however, there are important family components to even the most intensive professional intervention. The home visitor must begin with the family. Home-based interventionists vary in their experience. It would be very helpful to find an experienced colleague to work initially as a mentor. If the home-based program is working with a center-based program, communication is important. The team should bring the strategies being used at school into the home. Often the home program is the only one working with the child at this young age. Home visitors are extremely important in helping the family learn the new and different strategies that will bring them success in facilitating their child's development. These strategies also will support the child and family in the natural environment.

Parents of children with ASD can feel incompetent and unsuccessful. The EI system provides families with education and support to better understand their child's behaviors, strengths, and needs. Parents of children with autism often feel isolated from parents of children without special needs. Isolation can beget the feeling of failure. Strategies from a variety of treatment approaches can help families find success on which they can build. In addition, we are laying the groundwork for parents to collaborate meaningfully with a center-based program which will likely use some combination of the ABA approach. It is important for families to understand that Applied Behavior Analysis is not a single thing, but a wide variety of strategies and techniques from which to choose.

The Internet has become a major source of information and misinformation about the treatments for autism. In addition to the Internet, information from well meaning friends and family can add to the confusion. Many of these have little or no basis in research. Early Interventionists should continue to stay current with the latest treatment approaches, resources, and research. A local group of experts can provide support and current information for each other to maximize their learning. Additionally, there is an Autism Society of America (ASA) chapter in every state. The ASA Web site (www.autism-society.org) contains many links to other useful resources. One parent and professional-friendly resource is Autism/Asperger's Digest (www.futurehorizons-autism.com).

Suggestions for where to begin with the family:

- Communication and social skills are the most obvious needs of children with ASD. Let the family know that the kinds of strategies you will be helping them use may seem very different from their typical interactions with children. Help them to understand that they will be learning a whole new way to interact with this child. Some of the many Web sites for parents of children with autism can be very helpful to them (www.polyxo.com, www.autism-society.org, www.feat.org, etc.).

- Develop your familiarity with ABA. Use some common ABA terms and define them repeatedly for the family. Later on when someone uses a term such as “DROs” or “structured teaching,” the family will have heard it before. You may want to develop a definition sheet as a quick reference guide for parents.
- Families may tell you the child doesn’t communicate, but a closer look will show you that the child does—although not in the typical way. Tantrums and other atypical behaviors can often have a communicative function. Helping the family identify these behaviors and why they are used gives them a starting point from which to modify behaviors.
- One of the early things the family and the home visitor can do is identify the kinds of things that might be powerful reinforcers as a program is put into place. With the appropriate use of reinforcers, changes in behavior and communication can happen very quickly.
- One of the first things to begin using is visual supports. Visual supports are pictures and objects used to help the child anticipate events, adapt to changes in routines, and organize her response. Because pictures stay indefinitely the child can refer to them repeatedly, whereas oral utterances are gone as soon as they are spoken. Pictures of things the child actually has in her environment (her own sippy cup to represent drink) can be used as communication supports, schedules of events or transition markers.
- Parents can see more communication success when they begin to pare down their directions and comments to carrier phrases that are said the same way each time. The child will pick up the final word in these phrases much more easily. This gives the family some early success in oral communication. Functional phrases that give the child some control over his environment or facilitate social interaction are most important (phrases that get things to begin or stop, get help when he needs it, etc.). It is challenging to find unique and functional phrases, but it can be done (e.g., Blow bubbles. Help me. I need a break. Hold my hand.). Generic phrases such as ‘I want ____’ or ‘Give me ____’ have too many possible choices and are confusing.
- Transitions from one activity or place to another may trigger difficult behavior from the child especially when moving from a preferred activity to a less preferred activity. Using pictures to show the next change or the daily schedule can help the child anticipate what will come next and get ready for it. Using timers and verbal warnings can also help the child get ready and make the transition much smoother. Families can develop and use their own picture schedules as another form of visual support.
- It is crucial to connect the family to support groups in the community or online.

The home visitor has a unique opportunity to assist the family in gaining much needed knowledge and beginning to understand that this child will require something different from them and their extended family. Family members can begin to see small successes that can provide some hope while they learn valuable information and strategies they can use at home.

Lord, C., & McGee, J.P. (Eds.). (2001). *Educating children with autism*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.