

Using Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) at Home Article 3: Self Initiation

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Typically developing children learn a lot through asking questions of and otherwise eliciting a response from an adult or other children. From a young age, children learn new words and concepts by asking “what’s that?” or “why?” Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) do not initiate these social opportunities for learning (Koegel, L.K., Koegel, R.L., Shoshan, Y. & McNERney, E., 1999). Incorporating motivational strategies with these self-initiation skills teaches the child with ASD to initiate learning interactions. Robert and Lynn Koegel suggest “make it easy, make it simple and don’t turn it into a demanding situation” (Koegel, R.L. & Koegel, L.K., 2012, p98).

Asking questions to build vocabulary and gain knowledge

One technique involves placing a favourite item into a bag that hides the item from view. The child is then encouraged to ask “what’s that?” (the adult says “say, what’s that”). The parent then opens the bag, labels the item and the child is able to take the item from the bag. This can also be used to build sentence length or the use of describing words. For example, if the child is using one word to label an item, when the adult opens the bag they might use two words to label the item, such as “red car”. The parent might model a full sentence, “It’s a red car”.

As the child asks “what’s that” easily and more often, the parent uses items that are more neutral to teach new words. Similar techniques can be used to teach the child to ask “what happened”, “where is it” and “whose is it”.

Asking to gain a desired object or assistance

Another aspect of self-initiation is getting something from someone else. A child may learn to ask for help or to ask for materials or actions from other people. Again, motivation is used so that the child wants the help, object or action. You can set up your house so that items the child desires are in sight but in places your child cannot get them on their own. Items can be in hard to open containers, on high shelves (if your child will not likely climb to get them), behind a locked door with a window, or in another person’s hands. Prompt your child to ask for the item or for help to get the item when they show some interest in that item. Items or help that might normally be given freely to your child are not given until your child attempts to ask.

If your child enjoys drawing, you can place the crayons in a clear box with a difficult to open lid. When you notice your child attempting to open the box you can help them say, “Help me please”.

You can change the password on the computer so that your child must come ask you, “What is the password?” They show interest in the computer when that is what they want to do and will be naturally reinforced for asking by gaining access to the computer.

Gaining attention

The child with ASD is prompted to say “Look at me” in order to gain the adult’s attention to the task in which he or she is engaging. The adult would then reinforce the child’s request by immediately attending to them, commenting on what they are doing and giving further access to some aspect of the task.

While playing the child’s favourite game, soccer, the child is prompted to say “look”; the adult then

looks at the child and passes him the soccer ball.

While drawing a picture, the adult controls all the markers except the one the child is using; the child is prompted to say “look”; the adult looks, says “I see you’re drawing, here are some more colours to choose from” and hands the child other markers.

Asking to gain information about an object or action

Children with ASD may not use the active or past tenses of verbs (Koegel, R.L. & Koegel, L.K. 2012). These children can be taught to ask, “what’s happening” or “what happened” in response to an adult’s actions. The adult then provides the appropriate verb tense.

For younger children, find pop-up or pull-tab books about something in which the child is interested. As you are pulling a tab prompt the child to ask “what’s happening” (or stop pulling the tab and prompt the child to ask “what happened”). After the adult gives the answer, the child could pull the tab themselves if they desire.

Favourite items or items necessary for favourite activities could be removed from the usual places. The child would then be prompted to ask, “where is the _____”, the adult tells the child where the missing item can be found. If the child knows his or her prepositions, the child may be able to find the missing item themselves; otherwise the adult may show the child where the item is while labeling the

location.

When first teaching self-initiation, the adult’s responses can be kept short and the natural reinforcement should come quickly (Koegel, L.K. et al., 1999). This will keep the child motivated to initiate their own learning. Remember to continue using the motivation strategies: follow the child’s lead, intersperse and vary tasks and use the natural reinforcer that is associated with the question the child has asked.

Through learning to initiate these social interactions, children with ASD learn the value in these interactions. These skills have been shown to generalize to novel settings, materials and with untrained adults (Koegel, L.K., Koegel, R.L., Harrower, J.K. & Carter, C.M., 1999).

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