

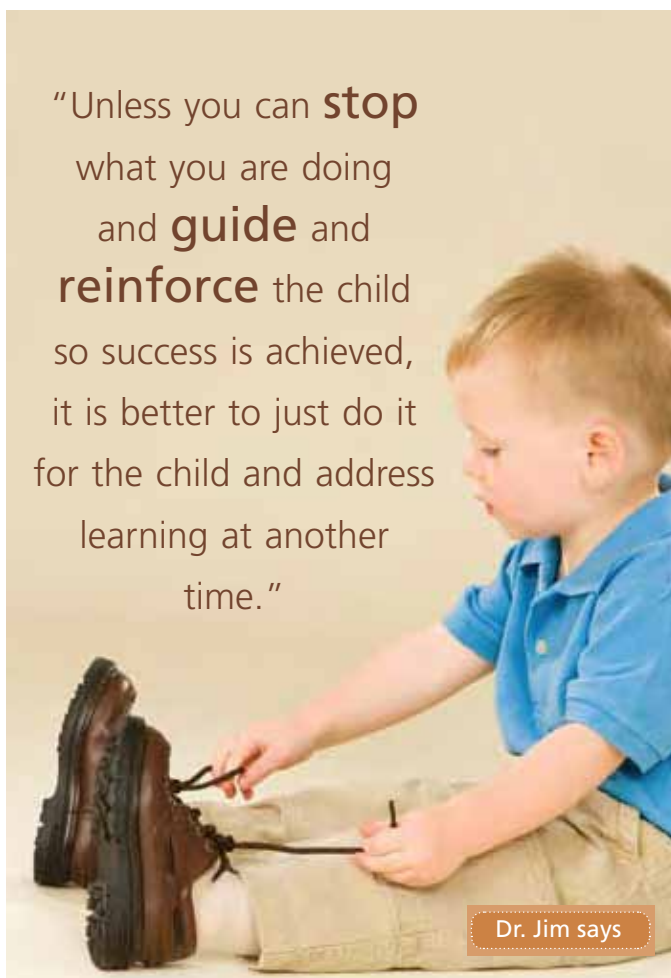
Building a Firm Foundation: Errorless Learning

Learning can be a successful experience for a child or learning can be torturous, ending with parent and child both in tears. It all depends on YOU! You are your child's first teacher and everything you do will impact the child's behavior and what is learned or not learned. Whether you're just starting to work with your child during early intervention, or your child is a little older, let this one essential idea guide you now and throughout the years to come: set up teaching situations and conditions so the child is always successful and has a positive learning experience. How? It boils down to four steps: 1) pause, 2) plan, 3) practice and 4) praise/reward.

Pause. In every instance, ask yourself, "Is this a teaching moment?" Not all are and it's up to you, the adult, to make this call. Teaching and engagement are different. You want to stay engaged with your child as much as possible. Engagement is helping your child explore his world and making it a fun, happy place that interests him. Teaching is about skill development: behavior skills, social relationship skills, language skills, etc. For example, your child is on the floor playing. Join him, engage him and praise him for playing. If he begins to build a block tower, guide him. When it crashes down, start building another. Engagement. Sure, grab a teachable moment to work on skills, identifying colors or practicing

turn taking. *But before you do*, pause, and make sure you can make this teaching moment successful for your child. Step out of the role of engaged parent and into the mindset of teacher: make sure you have a plan.

"Unless you can **stop** what you are doing and **guide** and **reinforce** the child so success is achieved, it is better to just do it for the child and address learning at another time."



Dr. Jim says

Plan. Understand the skill you are trying to teach and how to teach it successfully. The frequent mistake I see parents make is jumping into a teachable moment with no plan. Know which teaching tools you'll use to assure success: shaping, cueing, prompting, reinforcement, etc. (More on these in future columns.) Without a plan, things quickly spiral out of control despite your best intentions. You soon notice the teaching moment is not working (for you and the child), neither of you are feeling good about the experience (reinforced), so you try something else off the cuff, which just leads to more confusion. Your behaviors crumble. You hear yourself saying things like, "no" or "stop" or "why are you doing that?" The interaction turns negative. Yes, you are teaching, *but not what you started*

out to teach. The child is now learning an inappropriate way to gain attention (squirming, fussing, hitting, throwing things) or maneuver his way out of doing something he doesn't want to do. He's learned...that negative behaviors are successful!



Practice. Children on the autism spectrum need lots (and lots!) of practice to master skills that we adults might view as “easy.” Put aside preconceived notions of how much practice it “should” take, and let your child be your guide. Break skills down into small components, small enough that the child can be successful (with your help) at all times. Use hand-over-hand assistance to assure success in the beginning, or prompt the child to success. “What color is this block?” If the child struggles, say “Ruh, ruh...” for red to help him be successful. Repetition allows the child to practice the skill, know the skill, and become comfortable doing the skill. This leads to the child having the confidence to use the skill in other situations and with other people (generalization).

Be consistent in your practice sequences! This is one mistake many adults inadvertently make, especially in the beginning. For example, you’re in a teaching moment and tooth brushing is the skill being learned. You have your plan and your sequence of steps. You’re at the sink. This time you let the child drink a glass of water before she starts because she’s thirsty. Drinking water has now become part of the “chain” of tooth-brushing. Sure, you can break this habit down the road, but it’s better to stay strict to the plan in the beginning than to re-teach it later. A simple solution would be to complete the routine, praise the child’s success, then go get a drink with the child. It sounds like a minor point, but actually it’s not. She learns a skill, you learn to be consistent – not inflexible, consistent. And, with our kids, consistency is important, especially during the early learning years. Teaching flexibility is another skill – much farther down the road!

Praise/Reward. Make learning an enjoyable experience for the child. Be exaggerated in your positive reactions to your child’s learning attempts. Help him learn that trying and succeeding bring him something he likes. You may need to start out using tangible rewards (food bites, high-interest toys) at first, but couple them with verbal praise. Later you’ll fade out the tangible rewards, but not at first. For too many spectrum children, “no” or “stop that” are

all too frequently heard. If you find yourself uttering these words over and over, it’s you, not the child, who first needs to learn to do things differently. Find someone to teach you basic behavior modification techniques and then use them. They work.

The most important thing to remember is that teaching in the “moment” is very important and you should always look for those opportunities, but know when to teach and when to just let it go. Here’s a typical example. It’s first thing in the morning and time has gotten away from you. You need to get everyone together and out of the house. As you’re running around you quickly grab your child’s shoes, put them on his feet and say, “Tie your shoes.” You and he have been working on shoe tying; he’s been doing it successfully here and there. The child sits there and does nothing. As you run by you say, “I told you to tie your shoes!” You say it again as you whiz by a third time, then drop to your knees, tie his shoes and you’re both out the door. This was not a teachable moment for shoe tying, nor was this a successful learning experience for the child. Your goal was to get out of the house, not work on shoe tying. And, you’ve taught the child if he waits long enough his shoes will get tied. He won’t pick this up the first time, but after several times he will. Our kids are smart! The better way to go about it was to say nothing about shoe tying and just tie his shoes, recognizing you did not have time to stop what you were doing and help him be successful in tying his shoes.

“Errorless learning” is a positive foundation for teaching skills to a child, during both early and later intervention. Pause, plan, practice and praise and you’ll be on your way to successful learning experiences for you and your child. ■

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