



“Where do I start?” It was the question I asked myself when I first heard the diagnosis that my son, Mitchell, had severe autism. Nearly 20 years later, it is the same question I hear most often from parents as they embark on life with similarly challenged children.

My advice to parents, based on my own experience, is to learn about strategies *proven* to achieve success with children with autism. Early intervention programs based on “best practices” implemented at school and at home can, and do, yield positive results. By sharing the successful step-by-step teaching guidelines and educational tools I created for my own significantly impaired son my goal – and hope – is to give other parents a starting place in helping their own children achieve full potential.

### Step 1. Perform a Parental Assessment/Get to Know Your Child

The first step is taking time to understand the behaviors most significantly impacting your child with autism. In addition to a professional evaluation, perform a parental assessment in four main areas:

- **Social Interaction.** Does your child make any eye contact? Does he exhibit any interest in shared social engagement? Does he frequently exhibit inappropriate behaviors, e.g. screaming, flapping arms, biting? Does he have problems relating to you or other people?

# Do I Start?

## Step-by-Step Teaching Guidelines for Parents of Significantly Impaired Children with Autism

By Anne Scroggs

- **Communication Skills.** Is your child verbal or nonverbal? Does she have functional and meaningful language skills or is she just repeating words or phrases out of context? Does she communicate in nonverbal ways, i.e., pointing to an object or taking you by the hand to get something?
- **Sensory Reactions.** How does your child respond to visual, tactile, or audio stimulation? Does he seem overly or under sensitive to sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste?
- **Cognitive Issues.** Does she require set routines? Does your child seem to be processing the information you tell her? Is there any indication your child understands what you are saying?

Determine which areas are most critical and focus on them first. Typically, for many children more severely impacted by autism, developing some form of communication system is an all-important first step. This system may include sign language, picture cards, or other forms of alternative communication at first. The long-range goal, achieving meaningful language skills from your child, may be a ways off at first. A functional communication system opens the gateway to learning and gives parents the best hope for improving cognitive and social skills and managing the undesirable behaviors that are especially prevalent in this population.

### Step 2. Form a Relationship with Your Child/Imitation Therapy

After performing a parental assessment, I next recommend that parents focus on forming a relationship with their child. For the parent of a severely autistic child, a “relationship” might be as simple as getting your child to acknowledge your presence.

The method I used to establish a relationship with my son was Imitation Therapy. For 30 minutes every day I put myself in a room with my son with duplicate sets of interesting toys and copied his every action. Mitchell, like many severely autistic children, did not have basic imitation skills (i.e., learning by watching others and repeating what they do or say). My ultimate goal was to get him to mimic a word. The first step, however, was to get Mitchell to simply notice me. Eventually, Mitchell began watching me imitate him. A single glance acknowledging my existence: a wonderful and significant breakthrough!

At times I felt like this method wasn’t ever going to yield any results, but I never gave up. In my case, it took six months before I got my first imitation response from Mitchell—I stuck my tongue out that day and he did the same. Once an initial imitative reaction is achieved, you can expand to other imitations such as funny faces, which can segue into exaggerated formations of your lips and mouth, a

precursor to creating specific sounds, then words.

Don’t expect this approach to work over night. Expect to repeat each imitation over and over again, hundreds of times. While repetition is critical for most autistic children, significantly impaired learners often require many months of repetition to elicit even the smallest response. It took seven years before Mitchell spoke a word...but he did speak. I always believed he could do this and never gave up on him.

### Step 3. Introduce Visual Cues, Motivation Tools, and Positive Strategies

Once you have established a way to interact with your child, the next step is to encourage your child to begin to visually associate images with words. For parents of many severely autistic children this concept may seem impossible to implement. The good news is there are simple actions you can take to advance visual recognition in even the lower-functioning nonverbal child.

I introduced this step with Mitchell through the concept of choice. At snack time I would ask him, “Do you want grapes or an apple?” and show him pictures of each. (Some children will not respond to pictures. For them, offer the object itself; in this instance, some grapes or an apple.) Then I would help him point to or take the picture in his hand and encourage him to say the word. I used this same strategy with other choices: toys, places to go, and

activities. Requiring your child to make a deliberate choice before receiving a desired response teaches your child he must communicate to get what he wants. In the beginning, the goal may not be a verbal response, depending on your child's skill level. It may be indicating a preference, or associating an object with a picture of the object as part of the activity. The power of offering choices cannot be overstated; you are teaching your child to communicate his wants and needs, and in an appropriate manner.

Some parents think it isn't meaningful to have their child make choices if they have to move the child's hand to indicate the choice. It is, as long as it is done properly. Always offer one choice you know your child likes and one he does not like. It may seem your child is not truly learning, but look at it this way. By helping him select the choice he likes, you are teaching the association of word to picture, teaching the concept of individual choice, and teaching your child that language (or communication) gives him some control of his world. Important lessons! For significantly impaired children instruction needs to start at a very concrete level of learning. Hand-over-hand teaching can be a critical first step in establishing a functional communication system.

## **Step 4.** Establish a Structure and Schedule... Slowly

Once your child is at the picture identification stage, you can take the next step by slowly introducing structure and routine into your child's day. Structure is necessary to teach more challenged children the basic steps involved in learning, and reduces behaviors that can interfere with the learning process.

Establishing structure can be as simple as setting up visually divided areas for your child to associate with her activities for the day. Example: Set up a designated work area clearly separate from other areas in your home and in

a location your child cannot leave. For Mitchell, I placed a small plastic picnic table, portable bins with selected activities, picture books I had made, and a container of treats in his bedroom. I had my husband take a picture of Mitchell and me sitting at the table with our supplies and I typed the words "work with Mom" under it. Next, I used that picture and others to create a visual daily schedule. Our schedule read, "First eat breakfast. Then work with Mom" and included pictures of Mitchell performing each activity.

Visual schedules will help your child begin to understand a routine and anticipate what activity will come next. Using these schedules eases the transition from one activity to the next and reduces your child's likelihood for exhibiting inappropriate reactions at those transition points.

Even though you set up these clearly defined areas and have a routine schedule in place, it is important to note it can be a challenge to get a severely autistic child to just remain in a designated area, let alone perform a desired action in each location. Initially, you should set small goals and reward your child for simply sitting down. Once your child is familiar with designated areas, you can introduce simple one-step learning activities, then move on to two-step activities, and so forth. Progress will take time. Mitchell did not move beyond beginner, one-step schedules for several years. Today we use an advanced schedule book (visual daily planner) to organize his daily activities.

## **Step 5.** Learn Methods for Managing Unwanted Behaviors

Throughout all these steps you will encounter behaviors that make teaching your severely autistic child difficult. From bouncing and biting to flapping hands or screaming, you will face seemingly insurmountable behavior challenges that will continually impede learning. There are several different

best practices you can incorporate into your daily routine to help manage these behaviors and return the focus to learning.

Discover the root of the behavior and aim for resolution. Your child is acting out because he is bored; offer a stimulating activity like jumping on a trampoline or going on an outing. Your child is screaming and covering her ears; that's a clue something is too loud for her system. Modify the environment so it's quieter and/or remove the irritant if possible (a fan, the dishwasher rinse cycle, sneakers thumping in the dryer).

Provide safe and/or alternative options that satisfy the same need as does the inappropriate behavior. Present a teething ring or a chew necklace as a safe behavior replacement tool for a child who bites. Give a child who picks at his clothes a fidget toy to handle instead.

Remove competing or tempting stimuli. Lock all the cabinets so your child can't obsess over food. Put his favorite game in the drawer when it's time to work. Keep distracting art projects in the closet when working on something else.

Incorporate social stories into your daily routine. Use short clear sentences accompanied by pictures in a story format to describe undesirable and desirable behaviors.

These practices can and do work, but expect there will be times when even your best efforts will fail. My son, Mitchell, has presented many behavioral challenges over the last 21 years and on many an occasion I have found myself exhausted and in tears. The key is to persevere. You should expect that your more challenged child will behave inappropriately out of confusion, frustration, fear, anxiety, anger, or often because he simply cannot help himself (yet). Learn to recognize signs of beginning agitation and implement de-escalation procedures before you or your child lose control. This one piece of advice is ever so critical for successful one-on-one teaching sessions.

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## Step 6. Make the Learning Journey Fun

Keep expectations reasonable for your child, based on his abilities and his current level of functioning. Parents and teachers will often face difficult challenges and long timeframes requiring dedication and self-motivation before results are achieved. Learning is a journey, not an event. Make the journey fun and enjoyable for both you and the child. Notice the things that engage your child and motivate him to learn; track your success with those methods. Most importantly, celebrate each and every accomplishment, no matter how small they appear to be. It is often the tiniest successes that open the door to major gains.

A therapist specializing in childhood communication disorders once told me Mitchell would never be able to love me. I was also told that Mitchell would most likely never talk. I refused to accept their pronouncements about my son and instead, created a teaching plan and materials based on best practices, implemented them slowly and steadily over time, and believed Mitchell could do it. We defied those doom and gloom forecasts about what he would never do. Today, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that Mitchell can talk and he most definitely loves his mom. 🇺🇸

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