

# In-the-Moment Teaching Strategy: Wait!

We bet many of you have held off on giving a child something like a drink to get her or him to say the word *please*. But you can wait in so many other situations to build communication, coping, and independence.

The big ideas:

- Waiting as a strategy is when during everyday life, a parent for teaching purposes quietly waits (pauses, holds off) on doing something for a child.
- We encourage parents of kids with autism to embrace waiting as a frequent go-to strategy in these types of situations:
  1. before giving or doing something a child wants -- to motivate a child to communicate or communicate better;
  2. before providing help -- to foster problem-solving, sticking with a challenge, and learning from mistakes;
  3. before prompting -- to allow a child some time to process what was said, to self-correct, or to think through a problem.
- Waiting in difficult situations can be an instrumental part of helping a child learn to replace unproductive, negative behaviors with productive, positive ones.
- Waiting is more complicated than some of our other favorite strategies, such as *describing*. It requires reasonable, realistic expectations, prompting as needed, and flexibility. This sounds intimidating, but please try it! You can get guidance from your child's team on how to use waiting effectively. We believe parents can make a big difference when they are active "wait-ers" with their kids.

Think about when a parent takes off the training wheels on a child's bike, gives the child a push, then waits to see what happens. Either the child will pedal off on her own, or the parent will jump in with more help if needed. Be it bike-riding or a communication, coping, or other skill, waiting gives a child an opportunity to try out what she/he has learned, be independent, struggle with a problem, and yes, even to make mistakes.

Certainly there are situations when parents can't wait: they have to intervene quickly such as when a child is experiencing an intense sensory aversion, or a parent is very tired, busy, or in a hurry. Leaving those aside, all the other times you wait as a strategy will truly add up and matter in your child making progress

## Waiting Do's:

1. Be sure your expectations are realistic and achievable. Consult with your child's team, especially the Speech & Language Pathologist, on your child's current communication and other capabilities and what to work on.

Logan is currently nonverbal and is learning how to use PECS. Mom knows it's unrealistic to expect Logan to talk at this stage, but that it is realistic to expect him to use his PECS communication board to make specific food requests. Logan is sitting at the kitchen table and is ready for a snack. Rather than handing Logan a yogurt, Mom hangs onto it and waits with a smile on her face. Logan then touches the pictures for *I want* and *yogurt*. Mom immediately hands over the snack while saying, "Yes, Logan wants yogurt! Good job touching 'I want yogurt!'"

→ Mom took advantage of Logan's motivation to encourage a realistic communication.

2. When your child is learning a new skill or behavior say in school or outside therapy, use waiting during unstructured time to provide your child with practice and generalization opportunities.

Assume that for each skill or behavior below, the child has already learned or practiced it in a more structured situation.

- Turn-taking - Mom waits to give Child a toy so he will ask for it.
- Asking for help - Dad waits to help Child open a water bottle so she will ask for help (or even better, because Dad doesn't help, Child sticks with trying to open it and eventually succeeds).
- Using a communication device - Mom waits on giving Child more pizza so Child will use his device to ask for more pizza.
- Putting on socks - Dad holds off pulling up Child's socks so she can practice doing this on her own.
- Eye contact - Mom waits to blow more bubbles until Child makes eye contact. While we do not believe in forcing eye contact, we do think it is okay to encourage and reinforce eye contact during relaxed, positive interactions.

Parents are a great position to provide their kids with "real world" opportunities to practice what they have learned, and to let the team know if a child requires additional direct instruction, therapy, or intervention.

3. There will be times when waiting will not be enough: you will need to prompt. That's okay because prompting is a normal part of the process of helping a child to learn, practice, and improve.

Dad waits rather than moving out of William's way. After waiting a bit, Dad realizes he needs to prompt and says, "Say, 'Move, please.'" William then says, "Move, please." Dad immediately moves out of the way while saying, "Okay, I'll move. Great job saying, 'Move, please.'"

→ Dad took advantage of William's motivation to encourage communication. Ideally, Dad will make a point of blocking William in many different situations to provide William practice opportunities for saying, "Move, please." With enough practice and reinforcement (see 5. below), William should get to the point where he does not need prompting.

Make sure you pause long enough after giving a direction or asking a question to give your child a chance to process language, act on a direction, or self-correct. Many adults jump in too quickly with a prompt which can slow learning. Even worse, for certain kids, over-prompting can result in passivity and adult dependence.

Grandma just handed Mason a cookie. Mom says, "Hey Mason, who gave you a cookie?" Mason, replies, "Grandpa." Mom pauses to see if Mason will correct himself. Mason does indeed correct himself saying, "Grandma." Mom immediately responds, "Yes, Grandma gave you a cookie! Good job saying Grandma! I like how you changed your answer to 'Grandma.' Good job thinking!"

→ Because Mom waited, Mason was able to self-correct rather than be corrected. Notice how Mom also praised Mason for thinking. We encourage parents to focus not only on "correct" behavior but also on really important intangibles like making an effort to think something through. We want to encourage and support kids in their efforts to be active thinkers!

It is very important you get prompting guidance from your child's team as effective prompting is dependent on many things. Also, the method of prompting for certain interventions is very specific; e.g., PECS, Applied Behavior Analysis. So you want to make sure your prompting is consistent with the rest of the team. We provide more examples of parents prompting during in-the-moment teaching in *Tips & Topics, Spotlight: Prompting*.

4. In situations where you wait, whether or not you need to prompt, always reinforce your child's positive behavior.

Here is a visual illustration of what we mean:

Parent waits →

If needed, Parent prompts →

Child says/does something positive →

Parent immediately reacts for purpose of reinforcing what the child said/did

\*In reality, the process does not always go this smoothly, but for this "Do" we are talking about situations where as a result of your waiting, the child does something positive. If you are finding in reality the process is not going well, be sure to troubleshoot with your child's team.

The in-the-moment teaching examples in 1., 3., 5., and 6. follow this sequence. In each situation, as soon as the child says/does the desirable behavior, the parent reacts immediately and very intentionally for the purpose of reinforcing what the child said/did.

If you are not sure how to reinforce your child, you can learn! Talk to your child's team and check out our *Tips & Topics, Spotlight: Reinforcement*.

5. Wait even in difficult situations -- and we know this can be really hard! By doing so, you help your child learn to replace negative, unproductive behaviors with positive, productive ones.

Emma's dad is holding Emma. Emma wants down. She screams, "I want down!" Dad holds off on putting Emma down, because he knows that she is capable of saying "Down please" in a calmer, quieter tone of voice. This is no fun (for Dad or Emma) but he persists!

Realizing Dad is not going to put her down, Emma eventually says, "Down, please." She says it tearfully but the request is a big improvement on her screaming. Dad immediately puts Emma down while saying, "Okay! Now I put you down! Because you said, 'Down, please,' Daddy puts you down."

→ Dad's use of "because" is very intentional. He wants Emma understand that it was her positive behavior that resulted in her getting put down.

***It's critical for kids -- when stressed, tired, overwhelmed, etc. -- to learn, practice, and be reinforced for functional communication, coping, and problem-solving in difficult situations.***

Of course parents cannot always do in-the-moment teaching when a child is very upset. However, you could do after-the-moment teaching later when a child has calmed down. See an example of this in *Tips & Topics, After-the-Moment Teaching*.

6. What about the times when after waiting your child does something very positive, but it's not what you were hoping or expecting your child would do? Still reinforce your child's positive behavior. After reinforcing, if possible, try to somehow prompt/teach/encourage the behavior you had actually wanted your child to do.

Dad pretends to play with a truck in the doctor's office waiting area. He is holding off on giving Aria a turn because he wants her to ask, "Can I have a turn, please?" But instead of asking, Aria makes eye contact and says, "Daddy, I want the truck." For Aria, making eye contact as part of a communication is a big deal. The same is true for addressing her father by name (*Daddy*). Wow!

Even though Aria did not phrase her request in the form of a question, Dad immediately hands over the truck and says, "Thanks for looking at me and calling me Daddy!" Then Dad says, "Next time, Aria can ask like this, 'Daddy, Can I have a turn?'" If it makes sense under the circumstances, he could then playfully take back the toy, hold it out of reach, then prompt her, "Daddy, can I have a turn?" As soon as she asks, he would immediately hand over the toy. If Aria is enjoying this keep-away interaction, Dad can keep it going as an opportunity for Aria to continue practicing asking, "Daddy, can I have a turn?"

→ With some downtime before an appointment, Dad accomplished many things: he reinforced Emma's unexpected-but-big deal, positive behavior; he encouraged the behavior he wanted her to do through a playful interaction; and he enjoyed a brief but positive, social moment with his child. This example illustrates why we are such believers in parents doing in-the-moment teaching; little moments like these add up and truly matter!

We realize that the wait strategy not only requires you to be flexible but to think on the fly. This is not easy! Parents of kids with autism are already constantly faced with tough choices. The waiting strategy adds these to the list: If I wait in this situation, will my child melt down? How should I prompt her/him? Which positive behavior is the priority in this situation?

We do believe, however, parents are up to this challenge. The more you use waiting as a strategy, the better a sense you will have of how to react and respond to your child, including when to raise the bar on expectations and when to dive in with help or something else. Regularly updating and consulting with your child's team will be helpful.

## Final thoughts on waiting.

**Think about how you interact with your own child. Have you gotten really good at figuring out and even anticipating your child's needs and wants in order to avoid an unpleasant situation or even a melt-down? Do you quickly step in with help, a solution to a problem, a drink, snack, distracting toy, or something else in order to keep your child happy or calm? Time to re-think your well-intentioned approach and to use waiting as a strategy to help your child make progress!**

***Doing nothing* for your child -- meaning when you wait as a strategy -- is an act of love and a demonstration of belief in your child. So sit back, stuff your hands in your pockets, take a breath...and wait!**

Tip: Talk to the people who spend significant time with your child, such as grandparents or a babysitter, about the value of waiting to motivate communication or to foster coping and problem-solving. Explain how it is not good for your child to always get wants/needs without being required to communicate or stick with a problem. Demonstrate in real-time how to wait as a strategy.

