

In-the-Moment Teaching

We bet you are already saying and doing things to help your kiddo make progress. But do you consider even the most mundane moment of a day as an exciting opportunity? Do you recognize just how much of a positive impact that you as a parent can make? If you do the math, there are **a lot of hours each week when your autistic child is with you rather than in school or therapy**. Brief but frequent instances of in-the-moment teaching by you will add up and truly benefit your child!

In-the-moment teaching . . .

is when a parent says or does something in order to help a child develop communication, social, problem-solving, and coping capabilities.

is a great way to reinforce or further learning that has been introduced in a structured setting, such as school or therapy.

provides opportunities for a parent to foster and enjoy connections with a child who is not usually social, resists efforts to play, and/or is “stimmy.”

can happen anytime, anywhere, and requires no special planning or materials. Bedtime, bathtime, getting dressed time, mealtime, riding in the car time, truly any time is an opportunity for progress!

can provide through a single interaction the opportunity to work on multiple skills and/or concepts.

should be unforced, informal, positive (even fun!), and brief but frequent.

will give you a way to make a significant difference in the life of your child!

Yes, parents can be trained to utilize specific therapeutic techniques with their child, such as Floortime and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). We are all for that! But in-the-moment teaching is not a specific therapy or methodology. Instead, it is our label for all the different ways parents can informally and throughout the day foster progress in their children.

In-the-moment teaching Do's:

- ✓ Talk to your child's team about in-the-moment teaching for their guidance on how to do it and what to focus on. Show them the examples that follow.
- ✓ Be on the lookout for when professionals interact with your child, especially during unstructured time, such as the end of the schoolday: you can model what they say and do.
- ✓ Keep your child's team in the loop on your efforts and progress, and to trouble shoot.

Examples of parents using our favorite in-the-moment teaching strategies

How you would interact with your child will not exactly match what the parents say and do in the following examples. But these will give you a sense of how even the most routine task, humdrum activity, or random occurrence is an informal teaching opportunity. They also illustrate how interactions need not be long and drawn out to be beneficial.

Be on the lookout for other *Tips & Topics* that focus on our favorite strategies.

Note: Assume with all the examples, **the parents are speaking slowly and pause after each sentence**. Your child's Speech & Language Pathologist (SLP) can guide you on what words to use as you describe.

During dinner, Dad **describes** what is happening to help his son build receptive language and with the hope of sparking some back-and-forth conversation.

“Lucas, you and I are eating pizza. I like eating the pepperonis off the pizza. Lucas, you are eating the crust first.”

→ **Describing** is a very easy way to help kids build language and communication skills. Think of yourself as a play-by-play sportscaster covering a football game on the radio; i.e., narrate what is happening as it is happening. **Remember, describe slowly and pause to help your child process what you say and to give them time to respond.**

When Mom picks up her son from Grandma's apartment, she **describes** her son's behavior to help him understand what *disappointed* means and to reinforce his coping with disappointment.

“Jonah, Grandma told me when she said it was time to go home, you said, “Okay, Grandma.” You were feeling disappointed but you said, ‘Okay, Grandma.’ That was really good coping! Grandma says because you did such a good job coping, she would like to take you to the zoo again next weekend.”

While driving two girls home from school, Mom **describes** and **compares** what her daughter Olivia and a friend are thinking to help Olivia get better at understanding someone else's point of view (important for empathy and social skills).

“Olivia, you think train signals are awesome so you love to talk about them. But Raylin does not think train signals are awesome. Olivia, if you only talk about train signals what do you guess Raylin will think?”

→ **Comparing thoughts and feelings** in real-time helps kids with autism build social skills and get better at understanding how others think and feel. Note: we are not talking here about comparing one kid's “good” behavior to another kid's “bad” behavior; that is usually not a good idea.

As Dad and his daughter are watching a video, Dad **responds** to his daughter's communication to encourage and reinforce social communication. He also **describes** what Mia is looking at to help expand her vocabulary.

Mia uses her communication device to say, *“Bird!”* Dad responds, *“Yes, a bird! That bird is a hawk. The hawk is flying so high.”*

→ **Responding** to a child with autism is very important if the child has expressive and/or social communication challenges. Further, some kids with autism only communicate in response to a question, so creating opportunities for spontaneous social communication is especially important. **Again, seek guidance from your child's SLP, on how to communicate in a way that helps your child strengthen receptive language and expressive communication capabilities.**

While at the playground, Mom **uses verbal praise and tickling to reinforce** a positive social skill.

“Thank you for giving Emma a turn with the swing! Hooray for Justin!” Mom then tickles Justin.

→ Check out *Spotlight: Reinforcement* for more on reinforcement.

During getting dressed time, Dad **waits** to give his daughter help to encourage her to stick with a problem and/or to ask for help.

Sadie is struggling with her zipper. Dad leans back and does nothing to give Sadie a chance to get the zipper up on her own. As soon as it's obvious that Sadie won't be able to get it up, Dad taps Sadie and gives her an expectant look, waiting until Sadie asks for help.

→ Sometimes parents jump in too quickly help a child. While there are times it makes sense to give help right away, **waiting or holding off** fosters problem-solving and independence, and encourages expressive communication. Note: Dad's expectant look also serves as a gentle prompt. *If you are unsure as to when and how to prompt your child, be sure to get professional guidance.*

As Dad towels off Jordan after a bath, he gives them a silly “belly blow.” Jordan laughs. Before giving them another one, Dad **waits** and looks expectantly at Jordan until they make eye contact to encourage and reinforce that eye contact.

→ This is an example of a parent playfully waiting or holding off to encourage positive, social interaction (here, eye contact.).

Mom has just gotten home from work and her son Liam is in the kitchen eating dinner. When the family cat walks into the room, Mom **uses humor** to encourage joint attention, back-and-forth conversation, and to foster a positive, social interaction.

Mom points to the family cat and says, “*Wow, look! A big dinosaur!*” Liam looks and laughs, then says, “*No, that cat!*” Mom responds, “*Nooooo, that is a HUGE dinosaur. I’m so scared!*” Mom pretends to hide behind her coat. Liam says, “*Roar!*” Mom replies, “*Roar, the ferocious dinosaur is coming closer!*” Liam says, “*Dinosaur want eat Mom!*” Mom replies, “*The dinosaur wants to eat me?! I need to hide!*” Mom keeps this up as long as Liam is engaged.

→ **Humor** can be a wonderful way to connect with a child. However, some kids do not like humor or find it confusing (and that’s okay!). Only use it if it works for your child.

Getting ready to go out and play in the snow, Dad **uses humor** by making “mistakes” to encourage a positive social interaction (that includes verbal communication and eye contact), and to work on vocabulary and function of an object. He also **responds** to all his son's communications.

Dad puts a mitten on Joe's head and says, *“This mitten is for Joe's head.”* Joe laughs and makes eye contact. Then Dad puts the mitten on Joe's foot and says, *“Mitten is for Joe's foot.”* Joe makes eye contact, laughs, and says, *“No foot!”* Dad responds, *“Where does the mitten go?”* Joe holds out his hand and says, *“Hand.”* Dad immediately puts on the mitten and responds, *“Yes! The mitten is for Joe's hand! The mitten keeps Joe's hand warm.”* Dad then has Joe give him a high 5 with the hand with the mitten.

→ Do not underestimate the value of turning a mundane task, like putting on mittens, into a brief in-the-moment teaching interaction!

Note: Pronouns can be tricky for children with autism. They might have trouble understanding pronouns and/or mix them when speaking. This example shows a parent using a child's name in place of the pronoun *you*. Consult with your child's SLP on how to help your child build the ability to use pronouns correctly. A combination of visual teaching, practice in a more structured setting, and in-the-moment teaching can be very helpful for kids who struggle with pronouns.

At bedtime, Mom **is a sneaky trouble-maker** by pretending not to know what Anna wants. She then **neutrally (non-judgmentally) describes** the negative effects of her daughter's screaming, and encourages her to use her communication device.

“Anna, you are screaming. Mommy does not know what you want. Because Mommy does not know what you want, Mommy cannot help you.” Mom then **prompts** by pointing to Anna's communication device.

→ Mom's strategy is an example of what we call being a **sneaky trouble-maker**. (Some SLP's or other autism professionals refer to this as “sabotage.”)

While not always feasible, **neutrally describing** the negative effects of a child's behavior (such as screaming) can be valuable in-the-moment teaching. Describing the positive effects of behavior (such as coping) is also great in-the-moment teaching!

Dad is standing in the doorway. **Acting as a sneaky trouble-maker**, he pretends not to notice that his son James wants to come through, and intentionally blocks the doorway. Dad pauses long enough to give James a chance to communicate what he wants. When James does not, Dad **prompts** him to use his words.

Dad prompts, *“Say, ‘Move, please.’”* James says, *“Move, please,”* and Dad immediately moves out of James’s way.

→ **Prompting** is an important component of in-the-moment teaching. *Talk to your child’s team about the best way to prompt your child.*

Noah does not want to keep playing a video game with his brother. Mom **describes** what Noah is thinking to foster problem-solving. She then indirectly **prompts by asking him a question** to encourage communication.

“Noah, you do not want to keep playing the video game. You are thinking you want to do something else now. Noah, what can you say to Benjamin?”

→ Talk to your child’s team about how and when to use questions for in-the-moment teaching, and what wording they recommend (avoid language that is too complex for your child).

While at a stoplight, Mom sees a train. Knowing her son loves trains, she **takes advantage of this motivating situation** to help her son learn to respond when a person points while saying, *“Look!”*

Mom points and says, *“Look! A train is coming!”* Her son looks where she is pointing and sees the train. Mom says, *“Good job looking! Lucas looked where Mommy is pointing. Now Lucas sees the train!”*

→ Joint attention skills – such as looking where someone is pointing – can be very hard for kids with autism. **Take advantage of highly motivating situations** to practice and reinforce joint attention.

Rather than simply giving her daughter a cookie, Mom creates and **takes advantage of a motivating situation** for her daughter to practice processing verbal directions. Mom hides the cookie and her daughter has to follow Mom's verbal directions to find it.

Using a playful tone of voice Mom says, *“If you can find the cookie, you can eat it! I will tell you where it is. Walk over to the refrigerator. Now look on the counter to the right of the refrigerator. Lift up the napkin. Hooray! You found the cookie! Great job following my directions! Great job being a good listener!”*

→ For kids who do not enjoy or are confused by humor, skip it, but still take advantage of motivating situations!

Joining her son who is “stimming” on the family room floor, Mom **describes, compares, waits, responds, reinforces, and uses humor** while her son is “stimming” for all these purposes: to build receptive language, reinforce eye contact and turn-taking, and to enjoy a shared moment with her child.

Jayden is repeatedly rolling a small ball back and forth on the carpet. Mom grabs a hard-bound book and another ball and sits on the floor next to Jayden. Mom uses the book as a ramp to roll her ball down.

Mom **describes** and **compares**, *“Jayden is rolling his ball on the floor. Mommy is rolling her ball down the book. 1-2-3, go!”* Mom makes a silly sound as the ball rolls down.

Mom has gotten Jayden's attention. She can tell he wants a turn using the ramp.

Mom picks up her ball and **describes**, *“Jayden is thinking Jayden wants a turn. Jayden's turn! Now Jayden is rolling his ball down the ramp.”* Then Mom says, *“Mommy's turn!”* and rolls her ball. She picks up her ball and says, *“Jayden's turn! Good job taking turns with Mommy!”* As Jayden's ball rolls down the ramp, Mom **playfully makes a silly sound** which makes Jayden smile.

Mom then says, *“My turn!”* Before rolling her ball, she pauses before making the sound effect again and **waits** for Jayden to look at her. Jayden looks at her. Mom **responds/reinforces**, *“Thanks for looking!”* and immediately makes the silly sound as she rolls the ball down the ramp.

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Mom continues this back-and-forth for as long as Jayden wants to take turns with her rolling a ball down the book ramp.

Even if the turn-taking game is brief, it is a meaningful interaction filled with both in-the-moment teaching as well as a shared, positive experience.

→ ***The author of this piece, as an autism parent, knows from personal experience how very hard it can be to play with or engage in any way a child who is stimming.*** Often, a child will ignore a parent or reject her/his efforts. If you are totally rebuffed, take a breath, take a break, but try again in a bit. If your child is constantly stimming be sure to talk to your child's team for guidance. Stimming behaviors often stem from strong, internal sensory needs, stress, anxiety, and/or boredom. They depend on a child and the situation. The better you understand your child's stimming behaviors the better able you are to address them.

Final thoughts on in-the-moment teaching:

Parents should not feel pressure to always be “on” with their kids. We all need a break, as do our kids. Additionally, it’s okay to want at times just to be a parent and not a teacher.

Be assured that even with breaks from in-the-moment teaching, there are so many chances daily to do it. All those frequent, brief interactions will add up to something truly meaningful!

