

In-the-Moment Teaching Strategy: Wait!

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

The big ideas:

- Embrace waiting as a frequent go-to strategy:
 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, independence, 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.
- While not always pleasant, waiting as a strategy can be instrumental to the process of helping a child replace unproductive, negative behaviors with productive, positive ones.
- Get guidance from your child's team on how to use waiting effectively. The time and effort is truly worth it: parents can make a big difference when they become active “wait-ers” with their kids.

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? Time to re-think your well-intentioned approach and to use waiting as a strategy to help your child make progress and gain independence!

***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!**

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 (Picture Exchange Communication System). 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. 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 in school or outside therapy, use waiting during unstructured time to provide your child with practice and generalization opportunities.

Here are examples of parents waiting so their child can practice a newly learned skill in an unstructured setting.

- Turn-taking - Mom waits to give Evie a toy so she will ask for it.
- Asking for help - Dad waits to help Luke open a water bottle so he will ask for help.
- Using a communication device - Mom waits to give Chloe more pizza so she will use her device to ask for it.
- Putting on socks - Dad holds off pulling up Denver's socks so Denver can practice doing this on their own.

Parents are in 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. Use waiting as a strategy after you give your child a direction or ask a question. This gives your child time 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 Brianna a cookie. Mom says, “Hey Brianna, who gave you a cookie?” Brianna replies, “Grandpa.” Mom pauses (waits) to see if Brianna will self-correct and say *Grandma*. Brianna does indeed self-correct and says, “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, Brianna was able to self-correct. This is always more desirable than a parent correcting (prompting). Notice how Mom also praised Brianna for thinking. We encourage parents to praise a child whenever they **make an effort to think something through**. We want to encourage and support kids in their efforts to be active thinkers!

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. Get guidance from your child's team. This is because effective prompting is dependent on many things. For prompting basics and examples of parents prompting, check out *Tips & Topics, Spotlight: Prompting*.

4. Always reinforce your child's positive behavior.

Dad positions himself so he is facing Assad while pushing him on a swing. He gives Assad a big push and Assad laughs. Instead of pushing him again, Dad pulls the swing up close and looks at Assad with a playful, expectant expression, in other words, Dad waits. Assad says, "More push!" and Dad immediately pushes the swing and says, "Okay! Daddy pushes Assad!" Dad repeats this interaction several times.

→ When reinforcing positive behavior, it's critical to react/respond immediately. That helps the child connect their positive behavior to the parent's reaction.

Mom blows a bubble for Caleb who loves it. Mom then waits because she wants Caleb to make eye contact with her. The moment Caleb makes eye contact, she immediately blows a bubble and says, "Thanks for looking at Mommy!"

→ **Note: 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.**

Quinn is putting on a shirt. Dad waits to give help because he wants Quinn to accomplish the task or to ask for help. Dad says, "Wow, you are trying so hard. Good for you!" Quinn keeps trying and eventually gets the shirt on. Dad immediately makes a really big deal by picking up Quinn and spinning him around (Dad knows Quinn loves this) while saying, "Good job sticking with putting on your shirt! I'm so proud of you!"

→ By waiting, Dad gave Quinn the opportunity to struggle then have success with a difficult life skill (putting on a shirt). Quinn's success is in and of itself reinforcing. Dad's response (praising and spinning Quinn) adds additional reinforcement. Interactions like these foster independence!

Go back and look at our examples. Note how as soon as the child says/does the desirable behavior, the parent reacts immediately 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 for help on this. For basics on reinforcement, check out *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, and you encourage independence.

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 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! Because you said, 'Down, please,' Daddy puts you down."

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

Even though Mom is tired and in a hurry, Mom waits rather than helping Sofia button up her jeans. Sofia struggles and becomes frustrated. Mom decides to wait for a bit longer because she believes Sofia is close to success. Despite her frustration, Sofia sticks with the task and buttons her jeans. Mom immediately says, "Wow! You buttoned up your pants all by yourself! I know that was really hard, but you did it! High 5 for sticking with the button!"

→ **We get it! We know when you are tired or in a hurry, it's easier to jump in with help. But try to take the long view in these situations. Building your child's independence not only is good for your child, it's good for you, too!**

→ By the way, let's say after waiting you reach the conclusion you need to help your child. We encourage you to praise your child's effort, even if they were not successful. You can say something like, "I'm really proud of you for trying so hard. You were so close! Later, we can practice so you can get better at [skill]." (If it's clear your child needs more training on a skill, talk to your child's team.)

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.

Tip: Can't do in-the-moment teaching because you are too tired, in too much of a hurry, or a child is too upset? The teaching opportunity is not lost! Later, grab a few minutes to debrief on what happened. For more on this, check out *Tips & Topics, After-the-Moment Teaching*.

6. What about the times when after waiting your child does something positive, but it's not what you were hoping or expecting your child would do? Reinforce that positive behavior, then if possible, try to somehow prompt/teach/encourage the behavior you originally wanted.

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 and addressing her father as *Daddy* are both a really big deal.

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, please?'" He then playfully takes back the truck, holds it out of reach, and waits. Aria laughs and asks, "Daddy, can I have a turn, please?" As soon as she asks, he immediately hands over the truck. Because Aria is enjoying this keep-away interaction, Dad keeps it going as an opportunity to both share a fun interaction with her and for Aria to practice asking, "Daddy, can I have a turn, please?"

→ With some downtime before an appointment, Dad has accomplished many things: he reinforced Emma's unexpected-but-big deal eye contact and saying *Daddy*; he worked on a social skill (asking politely for something she wants) using a playful interaction; and he enjoyed a 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 many and often tough choices. *If I wait in this situation, will my child melt down? How should I prompt her/him/them? Which positive behavior is the priority in this situation?*

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

Final thoughts on waiting.

Think about when a parent takes off the training wheels on a child's bike and gives them a push. The parent waits to see what happens before jumping in with help -- and it's during that waiting that the child gets better at bike-riding. We want you to think the same way about any other situation involving your child. Waiting gives a child an opportunity to communicate, try out what they have learned, be independent, struggle with a problem, and yes, even make mistakes.

Certainly there are situations when parents can't wait for even a second; e.g., they have to intervene quickly for safety reasons; a child is experiencing an intense sensory aversion; or a parent is exhausted or in a huge hurry. Leaving those aside, all the times you are able to use the strategy of waiting will truly add up!

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.

