

# Autism Parenting Magazine

Issue 42

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# TAGteach:

## How ABA-Based Method Remarkably Changed My ASD Son's Life

By Martha GABLER

My son was diagnosed at age three with severe autism — plus he was profoundly nonverbal. He had many dysfunctional and dangerous behaviors including bolting, aggression and self-injury. We had many years of exhaustion, despair and heartache.



**D**uring the early years, I searched desperately for information about how to deal with my son's extreme behaviors, how to help him, how to teach him, and how to create a more livable family situation. Eventually, I discovered the facts I needed, but lost many years in the process. Now he is a cheerful, happy teen who loves to go out and have a good time. We could have been there a lot sooner.

TAGteach (Teaching with Acoustical Guidance) is an ABA-based method that makes it easy for parents to increase functional behaviors in their children with autism. Many of us have children with severe, difficult behaviors. We would like to help our children and our families. We would like to get some sleep, go to the grocery store and have some peaceful moments in our homes. We get a lot of generic advice and platitudes. We don't get the facts we need to

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help our children with the daily routines. We certainly don't get a realistic, low-cost way to apply them in our own homes.

With TAGteach it is easy to teach your child helpful skills like: Safe Walking, Safe Car Trip Behavior, Going to the Grocery Store, and Sleeping. It is an excellent way to de-escalate tantrums. TAGteach is great for parents because you already know ninety-five percent of what you need to know to use TAGteach:

- You observe your child every day, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- You know your child
- You know your child's needs and wants
- You are familiar with his settings
- You know his routines, triggers, limits and sensory profile
- You are the expert on your family
- You know your family's priorities
- You can apply your family's values
- You can tailor everything precisely to your unique situation

You have 95 percent of the knowledge you need to teach your child the behaviors he needs – behaviors that will increase your family's opportunities for a happier home life and participation in the community.

Here's the remaining five percent you need to know: just two facts.

### **FACT 1: “Behavior” is “movement”**

As parents, we talk a lot about “behavior.” We hear about “good” behaviors and “bad” behaviors, functional behaviors, dysfunctional behaviors and so forth. There is often a judgmental aspect, “That child has ‘good’ behaviors. That child has ‘bad’ behaviors.” There is an emotional aspect, and we may feel strong emotional reactions to our children's behaviors.

Have we ever asked ourselves, “What exactly is behavior? Here's the answer:

Behavior is movement, physical movement of the body.<sup>(1)</sup>

This is a liberating fact. Once you know that behavior is composed of physical movements of the body, you can forget about all the judgmental, emotional reactions and focus on your child's physical movements. You can study how your child “behaves” by observing how he “moves” the parts of his body.

You can see that there may be physical movements that are unproductive or disruptive, and physical movements that are productive or functional. You can then think, “Hmmm, how can I help my child perform more of those rare, but functional, physical movements?”

The answer to this question is FACT 2.

### **FACT 2: Positive Reinforcement Increases Behaviors (physical movements of the body)**

Here's the rule about positive reinforcement:

“Behavior that is already occurring, no matter how sporadically,

can always be intensified with positive reinforcement.”<sup>(2)</sup>

What this means, is that we can increase the sporadic functional behaviors that our child performs by providing positive reinforcement. Since we reinforced it, it will happen again. It will happen more often, and eventually, it will last for a longer time.

How can we do this in an easy, effective way?

TAGteach provides a simple approach. Observe your child, especially the physical movements he makes with his body. Decide on two or three physical movements he is already doing that you would like to increase.

Work on just one of these at a time. When you see your child perform one of the desired physical movements, here's what you do:

- Press the tagger when he performs the behavior (physical movement).
- Hand over a reinforcer (treat).

The more you “tag” and “treat” (reinforce) a behavior, the more your child will perform it. It's a simple, straightforward process. Your child will learn to do the reinforced behaviors more often, and will enjoy feeling of success and positive reinforcement.

Here's what's in it for your family:

- A calmer child with autism.
- A happier home.
- The opportunity to go out with your child and participate in the community.
- An easy, effective, low-cost, scientifically based way to increase your child's functional behaviors.
- A model for observing your child and figuring out which behaviors you would like to increase.
- A means by which you can truly communicate with your child and allow your child to have unprecedented control over his own learning. You and your child can become true partners in the teaching and learning process without coercion or force.
- Almost no financial cost. Taggers are inexpensive. If you don't have one, use a spoon to tap, a ballpoint pen, or a flashlight. Reinforcers are treats you probably already have around the house.

You can start right now, tagging and reinforcing your child whenever he or she performs a behavior you like. Then sit back and watch your child learn and grow.

## What is TAGteach?

TAGteach stands for Teaching with Acoustical Guidance. It is a teaching and communication method based on the scientific principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA).

TAGteach enables extremely precise positive reinforcement of behavior by using an acoustical signal to “mark” the behavior – at the precise moment the child performs the behavior! The acoustical signal is a short, sharp sound made by a handheld device (the “tagger”). When the child performs the correct action, the parent/instructor immediately presses the button on the tagger and hands over a treat (candy, treat, token, praise, social recognition, or money) as a reinforcer.

With TAGteach, it is easy to reinforce behaviors precisely and quickly. The immediate, accurate feedback and positive reinforcement result in the child performing the correct action more often, and for longer periods of time. With immediate feedback and learning tasks broken down into small steps, children (and adults) can learn many new skills with TAGteach — at their own pace.

*Martha Gabler and her husband are the parents of two boys. The younger one, now 18 years old, was diagnosed at age three as having severe autism and being profoundly non-verbal. He had all the common difficult behaviors typical of children with autism, including bolting, self-injury and aggression. By sheer chance, she learned about TAGteach and realized instantly that this method for positive behavior change could be a huge help. This turned out to be the case. Her son is now a delightful, happy teen who loves life and loves going places. He still has autism, but life is much better for the family.*

For specific information about how to help your child learn specific skills, please see the website below.

Website: [www.autismchaostocalm.com](http://www.autismchaostocalm.com)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Autism-ChaosToCalm?fref=ts>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MarthaGabler>

<sup>(1)</sup> Dr. Martin Kozloff, *Educating Children with Learning and Behavior Problems* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1974), p. 9.

<sup>(2)</sup> Karen Pryor, *Don't Shoot the Dog! The New Art of Teaching and Training* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1999), p. 1.

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## WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS WEEK



Saturday 2 – Friday 8 April is **World Autism Awareness Week!** There are loads of things you can do to support autistic people – you could take part in **Onesie Wednesday™** or organise a pink and purple bake off!

For more information and to order your FREE **World Autism Awareness Week** pack, visit [www.autism.org.uk/waaw](http://www.autism.org.uk/waaw)



The National Autistic Society is a charity registered in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427).