



Behavior Basics

Volume 1

A Primer for
Autism Parents:
The Vocabulary
of Positive Reinforcement

By Martha Gabler MA

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Behavior Basics: A Primer for Autism Parents

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Basics:

A Primer for Autism Parents

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Part 1: What is Behavior?



Remember, the ABCs of behavior science: Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence.

Behavior (physical movement of the body) occurs in a specific time and place. When studying behavior, analysts look at what happened just prior to the behavior (the Antecedent), the specific physical movements that the learner made (the Behavior itself), and what happened immediately after the behavior (the Consequence). For example, let's look at this scenario: The antecedent: a child sees a rack of candy bars at eye level in the supermarket. Behavior: the child whines and begs for a candy bar.

Consequence: the parent buys the candy and the child is quiet.

This sequence of events will have an effect on the future behavior of both the child and the parent. The child is more likely to whine and beg the next time he sees candy in the store. The parent is more likely to buy candy the next time since the child was quiet as a result.

Behavior Basics #2

*What is behavior?
Behavior is **movement**,
physical movement of
the body.*

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What is Behavior? Behavior is movement, physical movement of the body.

Behavior is composed of physical movements of the body. Imagine somebody playing the violin: one hand supports the instrument, the fingers of that hand press on the strings, and the other hand moves the bow over the strings. Now imagine somebody hailing a taxi in New York City: the body leans toward the street, the head faces oncoming traffic, the hand nearest to the street waves at passing cabs. Every behavior we do is composed of anywhere from one to dozens of distinct physical movements of the body.

Behavior Basics #3

When we **behave**
we **move** parts of
our body.

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When we behave, we move parts of our body.

To do even the most mundane chores, we move several parts of the body, move those parts in specific ways and often in a specific sequence. Think of making coffee in the morning: Walk to the cupboard and grasp coffee can, grasp coffee pot, walk to sink to fill with water, pour water into coffee maker, scoop coffee into filter basket, push basket back into place, press ON button. The everyday behavior of making coffee requires the physical movements of walking, grasping, lifting, turning knobs, pouring, scooping, pushing and pressing.

Behavior Basics #4

*Behavior is movement
so it is **observable**.*

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Behavior is movement, so it is observable.

Behavior is movement of the body, so it is something that you can see or hear. If you can see or hear it, you can observe when and where that behavior happens. For example, if a child engages in the behavior (physical movement) of foot stamping, you can observe to see if it happens in certain rooms of the house, outside in the yard or playground, or in the car. You can observe to see if it happens more often in the morning, afternoon or evening, on weekdays or weekends. This observation provides information that can be used to develop a behavior plan to address foot stamping.

Behavior Basics #5

*Behavior is movement
so it can be observed
and **counted**.*

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Behavior is movement, so it can be observed and counted.

Behavior is movement that can be observed (it can be seen or heard), so it can also be counted. A simple way to count a behavior is to count how many times it happens each day. In the example of a child shrieking, you can count how many times during the day the child shrieked. Many parents count behaviors with tally counters; simply attach one to your belt, count every instance of shrieking, and write down the number of instances at the end of the day. This will provide helpful information. You can establish a baseline of how often the behavior occurs. After implementing a behavior plan, the daily counts will tell you whether the plan is succeeding in replacing the behavior.

Behavior Basics #6

*Behavior is movement
so it can be observed,
counted and **charted**.*

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Behavior is movement, so it can be observed, counted and charted.

Behavior is physical movement of the body that can be seen or heard (observed). The movements can be counted. After counting behavior for several days you will have data; for example: on Monday, Johnny shrieked 59 times; on Tuesday, Johnny shrieked 83 times; on Wednesday, Johnny shrieked 76 times. These numbers can be charted or graphed; the line on the chart shows whether the behavior is increasing or decreasing. The Standard Celeration Chart, a Precision Teaching tool, is a particularly effective, scientific tool for charting the rate of change of a behavior.

Behavior Basics #7

*Behavior is movement
so it can be observed,
counted, charted
and analyzed.*

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Behavior is movement. It can be observed, counted, charted and analyzed.

After you have observed, counted and charted a learner's behavior (physical movements), you can analyze the data. This analysis is called a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). The purpose of the FBA is to determine what function the behavior serves for the learner: i.e., the child is doing this behavior for a reason, so what is the child gaining from this behavior? Studying the consequences that follow the behavior will shed light on this question. Some common reasons for children to engage in behaviors are to gain attention, seek relief (escape), or divert attention. There are many other potential reasons.

Behavior Basics #8

*Behavior is movement,
it can be observed,
counted, charted,
analyzed and **changed**.*

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Behavior is movement. It can be observed, counted, charted, analyzed and changed.

After the behavior has been analyzed, the next step is to set up a plan so that the learner can achieve his/her needs (as determined by the FBA) in more acceptable ways. Often, a decision is made to provide positive reinforcement for an alternative, acceptable behavior to replace the less desirable behavior. We know from behavioral science that a behavior that is reinforced is a behavior that will occur more often. With consistent delivery of positive reinforcement, along with monitoring the behavior plan and making adjustments as indicated by data, it is possible to make good progress in achieving helpful behavior change in a sensitive, humane manner.

Part 2: Maintaining Behavior



The antecedent is the cue or stimulus that comes before the behavior occurs.

The antecedent is an event that precedes another event. The antecedent includes the setting, events and persons or things in an environment that preceded the behavior of the learner. The antecedent could be the sound of the smoke detector in the home, the growling of a dog on the street, or the arrival of a group of students in a classroom. Antecedent events can also be things like requests to do perform a task or directions to follow.

Behavior Basics # 10

The **consequence** is what happens **after** the behavior as a **result** of the behavior .

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The consequence is what happens after the behavior as a result of the behavior.

After a learner performs a behavior (makes a physical movement), there is a consequence that follows immediately. Karen Pryor explains, “Consequences frequently . . . affect future behavior, making the behavior more or less likely to occur.” A behavior followed by a pleasant consequence is more likely to occur again. The common behavior of opening the refrigerator door will occur more often when the refrigerator is well-stocked and offers pleasant food options. Opening the refrigerator door will occur less often if the refrigerator is empty and dirty.

Behavior Basics # 11

The *consequence*,
NOT the antecedent
determines the future
course of a behavior.

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The consequence, NOT the antecedent determines the future course of a behavior.

The consequence rules! The consequence of a behavior determines what course the behavior will take in the future. A behavior that results in a pleasing consequence to the learner will be repeated in the future. A behavior that results in painful or distasteful consequences will generally not be repeated in the future. We all seek pleasure and avoid pain and discomfort.

Behavior Basics #12

A pleasant *consequence maintains* a behavior,
keeps it going.

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A pleasant consequence maintains a behavior, keeps it going.

When a learner experiences a pleasant consequence (praise, treats, rewards, affirmation, recognition) after doing a behavior, the learner will perform that behavior more often. The more the learner experiences pleasant consequences, the stronger the behavior will become, and the longer it will last.

Behavior Basics #13

*A pleasant **consequence** causes a behavior to occur more **frequently**.*

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A pleasant consequence causes a behavior to occur more frequently.

This fact, this scientific law, underlies all behavioral interventions. This fact tells us how we can increase desired behaviors in learners. Whenever a learner performs a desired behavior, make sure he or she immediately experiences a wonderful consequence! The learner will do that behavior again.

Let's say a child routinely comes home and tosses her jacket on the floor instead of hanging it on the coat rack. You can say to the child, "The tag point is Jacket On Hook." As soon as the child hangs the jacket on the hook, give her a high-value treat or token. Every time the child hangs the jacket on the

hook, give another treat. Soon your child will hang up her jacket as a matter of course. You have changed her behavior without scolding, nagging or threats. The pleasant consequence of a treat or token, along with praise and happy looks from mom or dad, cause the child to hang up her coat more frequently.

Behavior Basics # 14

A pleasant **consequence** causes a behavior to become **stronger**.

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A pleasant consequence causes a behavior to become stronger.

Not only does a pleasant consequence cause a behavior to occur more frequently, it causes the behavior to become stronger.

Let's look at the girl in the example above. She continues to hang up her jacket on the hook, and one day, she sees that somebody else's coat has fallen off the coat rack. She picks it up and replaces it on the hook! If her observant mom or dad have the chance to see this and give her another pleasant consequence, she will continue to pick up more coats, and perhaps tackle the hats and scarves.

Behavior Basics #15

Do we need to ask
“What *caused* the
behavior?”

No No No!

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Do we need to ask "What caused the behavior?" No No No!

When dealing with any problem, it's always important to ask the right question. We know from Behavior Basic #11 that the CONSEQUENCE, not the antecedent, determines the future course of a behavior. In the early years when I was struggling with my child's difficult behaviors, I kept asking myself, "What is causing this?" It was the wrong question. By focusing on the wrong question I couldn't come up with a solution.

It's important to be aware of factors that trigger behaviors, such as hunger, fatigue, or stress, but we can't control our children's environment. We can only control how we respond to a child's behavior. And we respond by deciding what the consequences should be. If we know that positive consequences increase behaviors, we can stop accidentally giving positive consequences (attention, treats, privileges) for undesired behaviors and train ourselves to give these only for desired behaviors.

Behavior Basics #16

Do we need to ask
“What **maintains** the
behavior?”

Yes Yes Yes!

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Do we need to ask "What maintains the behavior?" Yes Yes Yes!

This is the right question to ask. When a child does something, think about what happened after the behavior. If the child experienced a consequence that was useful to him, the behavior will occur again. Please note, the consequence may not seem pleasant to us, but if the behavior keeps happening then the consequence was positive for the child. It is well known that children sometimes misbehave to get attention because a scolding is better than being ignored.

We know from Behavior Basic #12 that a pleasant consequence maintains a behavior--keeps it going. So, the right thing to do is to monitor the consequences we deliver

to our kids after they do something. The right thing to do is to provide pleasant consequences for behaviors we like, and to ignore behaviors we don't like. (Of course, if a behavior is dangerous or destructive, we have to step in, take charge, and re-direct the child.) This may seem awkward and unnatural at first, but after a while it becomes easier. The reward for taking charge of the consequences we deliver is an increase in desired behaviors in our children.

Part 3: Increasing Behavior



To increase a desired behavior, give the learner a treat or other positive consequence.

This is the golden rule of Applied Behavior Analysis! To increase a desired behavior, give the learner a treat or other positive reinforcement. As soon as the learner has performed the desired action (which could be anything – eye contact, touching a puzzle piece, walking into a room), give the child a treat (which could also be anything – a piece of candy, a toy, a token, a favored activity, praise, or attention). This will cause the learner to perform the behavior again.

Behavior Basics #18

A *positive consequence* that strengthens a behavior is called a *reinforcer*.

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A positive consequence that strengthens behavior is a “reinforcer.”

The definition of reinforcer is anything following a behavior that strengthens the behavior or causes it to occur more often. Sometimes people refer to the reinforcer as a “reward.” While this is a commonly used word, the technically correct term, reinforcer, more accurately describes the result of strengthening or reinforcing a behavior.

Behavior Basics # 19

*Positive reinforcement
increases the strength
of a behavior and the
chance of it recurring.*

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Positive reinforcement increases the strength of a behavior and the chance of it recurring.

When a learner experiences a pleasant consequence (i.e., the reinforcer) after performing a desired behavior, the learner will try that behavior again. We are all primed to understand our environments in terms of consequences. Most people will eat a second potato chip after enjoying the first one. When we experience pleasure, rewards, treats, attention or praise, we know we did something right, and we will do that behavior again.

Behavior Basics # 20

A *positive* consequence *after* a physical movement, will cause that movement to happen *again*.

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A positive consequence after a physical movement will cause that movement to happen again.

From behavioral science, we know that positive reinforcement increases behavior. It is important to remember that the positive reinforcement should be delivered immediately after or even during the behavior—not before. The sequence is: learner performs a behavior, then instructor gives reinforcer. At some point in the future the learner will perform the behavior again, and the instructor will give a reinforcer again.

Part 4: Reinforcers



A reinforcer increases the likelihood that a behavior will happen again.

When a child with autism receives a reinforcer after performing a desired action, the child will be more likely to perform that action again. The child has experienced a pleasant consequence and, as a rational being, would like to experience another pleasant consequence. This sets in motion a positive cycle, where the child makes more efforts to earn reinforcers, and thus performs the desired behavior again.

Behavior Basics # 22

A **reinforcer** is anything the learner **likes** and will work for (candy, stickers, money, praise etc.).

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A reinforcer is anything that the learner likes and will work for (candy, stickers, money, praise, etc.).

A reinforcer can be anything, provided that the learner likes it. It can be candy, treats, tokens (for earning privileges), activities, puzzles, games, money, praise, recognition or the opportunity for social interaction. The important feature of the reinforcer is that the learner (not the instructor) values it and will work for it. Monitor the reinforcements you offer a learner to make sure that the learner continues to like them. If the learner gets tired of a particular reinforcer, try something else until you have some new items that he/she enjoys. The ability to come up with varied, enticing reinforcers is a wonderful skill to have.

Behavior Basics # 23

*To build a desired behavior, **reinforce** it!*

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To build a desired behavior, reinforce it!

This is the core principle of Applied Behavior Analysis -- the golden rule, the way of truth! When teaching, think of what you want the child to achieve (reading a sentence, setting the table, hanging up a coat). When the child performs that great behavior, reinforce it! Give him a treat, token, praise, appreciation, recognition, money, or anything pleasing. The child will do that behavior again. When he does it again, reinforce it again! Reinforcement will result in that behavior becoming a routine activity for him. Then go on to the next step and build another great behavior.

Behavior Basics # 24

*To build a desired behavior, **reinforce** it **immediately** after it occurs.*

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To build a desired behavior, reinforce it immediately after it occurs.

We discussed how important it is to reinforce a behavior so that the child performs it again. But, there is an important detail to think about! When you reinforce the child, you have to do it right away! Reinforce as soon as she performs the behavior. When you reinforce right away, the child will know exactly what she has done that is right. Don't dawdle or delay! Get in there right away and start handing out praise, thanks, treats, tokens, recognition, or whatever is pleasing to the learner. If you are late with the reinforcer, the child will be confused. What did she do to earn the treat? She won't repeat the desired behavior and may repeat some other random behavior. The quicker you are with immediate

reinforcement, the faster the child will gain that great new skill.

Behavior Basics # 25

*To build a desired behavior, **reinforce** it **every time** it occurs.*

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To build a desired behavior, reinforce it every time it occurs.

The scientific laws of behavior tell us that positive reinforcement increases a behavior. The next step to talk about is how often to reinforce a behavior. The general rule is, to build a behavior you must reinforce this new desired behavior every time it occurs! Naturally this takes vigilance, but it is important for the child. He has to experience that every time he does this particular desired action (touches a block, puts a puzzle piece in place, says “thank you”), he will receive a reward of his liking. This experience will cause him to repeat the behavior more often. When this happens, you are well on the way to building a new behavior. Reinforcing an action every time it occurs is called a “continuous

reinforcement schedule.” Continuous reinforcement is the first part of a behavior building plan. TAGteach (Teaching with Acoustical Guidance) is an excellent tool when building behavior with a continuous reinforcement schedule. TAGteach allows you to “tag” and reinforce behaviors precisely and much more frequently than with verbal praise or other methods. With TAGteach you can reinforce a behavior every few seconds, or almost continuously, if the child is displaying the behavior at a high rate. It’s an invaluable tool for this stage of the behavior building process.

Behavior Basics # 26

The more behaviors a child learns, the more opportunity there is for participation and enjoyment in life.

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Remember, movements are behaviors. Behaviors are movements.

Let's review what a behavior is. A behavior is one or more physical movements of the body. A behavior may be simple and use only one physical movement (turning the head to look at the source of a sound) or it be complex and require several different physical movements in a particular sequence (washing hands). Many times we think of the desired end result of our teaching process as a "behavior," without taking the time to break that behavior down into separate physical movements of the arms, legs, head or torso. It is much easier and faster to teach one small physical movement at a time than a constellation of different movements in a sequence. It is much easier and faster for a

child to learn one small physical movement at a time than a complex sequence of movements. You want the child to have success, so break the behavior down into physical movements she can do. TAGteach (Teaching with Acoustical Guidance) is an invaluable tool for breaking a behavior down into its component physical movements. You can only tag one small movement at a time, so simply holding the tagger in your hand makes you think about what specific movement you want the child to do.

Behavior Basics #27

*Children with autism
may have many
behaviors going on
at the same time.*

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Children with autism may have many behaviors going on at the same time.

Another way of saying this is that children with autism may have many physical movements going on at the same time. Children with autism can be extremely physically active. If you observe them, you may see that the hands, arms, legs, torso, neck, head, facial and vocal muscles are all active at once. Take the time to observe your child. Download the free “Child Observation Chart” from

<http://autismchaostocalm.com/resources/free-downloads/>

and make a note of the specific types of physical movements your child is making. When you see how many movements your child is displaying, you realize how careful you have to be when reinforcing behavior. With so much going on it is

easy for the instructor to reinforce something too early or too late, and for the child to be confused about what is being reinforced.

Behavior Basics # 28

*So how does a child
know which behavior
you want? **Timing!***

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So how does a child know which behavior you want? Timing!

When a child is making multiple movements with her body, the question comes up, how does she know what you are reinforcing? She may be running, swinging her arms, swiveling her head and shouting. She may be performing a desired behavior, but that behavior appears for only a split second and is buried in an avalanche of dizzying movements. How do you pick out that micro-second of desired physical movement? The answer is: Timing. You reinforce her precisely during the split second she is performing the behavior you want. With the quick click sound of a tagger, you can reinforce a child for a micro-second of behavior at the exact moment she is performing that behavior. The

method of using a click sound to reinforce a behavior is called TAGteach. The click sound is called a tag. The tag tells the child: "Yes - that was right", with precision, clarity and consistency. Even though she is performing many movements, the child will realize that something caused a positive consequence in her world. She will quickly figure out which movement resulted in that positive outcome (kids with autism are brilliant at this), and she will repeat the movement. TAGteach is extraordinarily effective for precise timing of reinforcement. There is nothing else like it. The human voice is much too slow and too late for this type of precision reinforcement. By the time you say, "Good job," or "That's it," the child will have performed many more physical movements. She won't know which movement you are talking about, and your efforts will be wasted. Timing is critical. Timing is all important. Time -- for our kids with autism -- is too valuable to waste.

Behavior Basics # 29

*You must give the
reinforcer at the
exact moment the
child does the behavior.*

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You must give the reinforcer at the exact moment the child does the behavior.

In Behavior Basic 28 we discussed the importance of timing when reinforcing behavior in a child with autism. You must reinforce the child at the precise moment he does the desired physical movement. If you reinforce too early or too late, the child will be confused; he won't know what he did to earn the reinforcer, so he probably won't repeat that exact desired movement. It is not easy to reinforce a child at the split second he does a desired movement, but TAGteach (Teaching with Acoustical Guidance) makes it easy. When I set out to teach my son to kick a ball, my first tag point (physical movement to reinforce) was Walks Near Ball. The ball was out in the yard and every time he dashed within five feet of it

I tagged and gave him a reinforcer. Even though he was busy running and yowling, he realized very quickly that being in the vicinity of that ball resulted in very nice consequences. Soon he was running and walking around the ball, just the result I wanted.

Behavior Basics # 30

The *timing* of the
reinforcer is
information for the
child.

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The timing of the reinforcer is information for the child.

In Behavior Basic 29 I described how I tagged my son every time he dashed within five feet of a ball. This was Step One of my program to teach him to kick the ball. Because my son heard the tag and received reinforcement when he ran or walked within five feet of the ball, he deduced that the area around the ball was a great place to be. I did not verbally ask him to approach the ball. I did not show him how to walk near the ball. I did not take him by the hand and drag him to the ball. All I did was tag him precisely when he was in the vicinity of it. The quick click of the tagger and the reinforcement gave him this information. We accomplished

Step One quickly, easily and with no stress and no exasperation.

Behavior Basics #31

The *timing* of the reinforcer tells the child what he did *right*.

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The timing of the reinforcer tells the child what he did right.

We have talked about how children with autism may have many behaviors (physical movements) going on at the same time. At some point, the child will perform a movement that you want to see happen more often. When this one specific movement is happening -- in the blur of many other movements -- the only way to distinguish it from the blur of activity is with pinpoint timing. With TAGteach you can pinpoint that micro-second of desired action by pressing the tagger, and then delivering the reinforcement as quickly as possible after that. The child knows that the sound means that a treat is coming, so the child pays attention to what he or she does that causes the sound to happen. The pinpoint

timing of the tag (click sound) gives the child information about which specific movement is earning the reinforcement. When the child with autism knows exactly which behavior is earning reinforcement, he or she will do that action more often.

Behavior Basics #32

Late reinforcement is ineffective for teaching a child, especially one with autism.

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Late reinforcement is ineffective for teaching a child, especially one with autism.

Children with autism often perform many behaviors in quick succession and in changing sequences. When they are performing behaviors (physical movements) so quickly, it is a challenge for us to tell them exactly which behavior we want, and it is a challenge for them to figure it out. Generally, people use their voices to tell a child, “Good job,” or, “That’s it.” The problem is that words come out of our mouths a second or two after the child does the behavior, plus the words themselves take one or two seconds to emerge: this means a three to five second delay in getting information to the child. In that three to five second period, the child will have performed several other behaviors. How can the child

figure out, in his confusing world, what that praise was intended for, even assuming he can understand the words? The information is too late to have meaning for him. The late praise and even later delivery of reinforcement will slow down the child's learning process. Why create confusion and delay when we can provide real-time, split-second information? Delay is the last thing a child with autism needs. Fast timely action brings much better results.

Part 5: Timing of the Reinforcer



Slow reinforcement is ineffective for teaching a child, especially one with autism.

A child with autism lives in the moment. He is keenly aware of what is happening right now, and often, right now he has at least three or four behaviors (physical movements) going on simultaneously. Those movements change very quickly—every few seconds he’s doing other actions. Let’s say the child momentarily does one action that you wish to reinforce, so you run over and say, “Hey, good boy for doing that,” and hand out a treat. I timed myself walking a distance of 12 feet, saying, “Hey, good boy for doing that,” and handing over a

treat. It took 4 seconds. In those 4 seconds, a child with autism has performed many more movements and is thinking about those new movements. The one you liked, that happened about 5 or 6 seconds ago, is history. So if you walk over to your child, praise him and hand over a treat, you are too slow and too late. The child won't know what you reinforced. He won't know what you want him to do again. Your reinforcement will be ineffective because it is not paired precisely with the desired behavior. Effective reinforcement is timely, on-time, and precise information. It tells the child, "That thing you are doing right now is great. Do it some more." Our voices and words, with which we are so enamored, are slow, clumsy and too late to give exact, pinpoint information to the child. So, help the child out. Make sure that, during the time that he is doing a desired action, he gets the information, "YES. That's right," and now a treat is on the way. See Behavior Basic #34 for more information.

Behavior Basics #34

What's the solution to late or slow reinforcement? Use a conditioned reinforcer.

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What's the solution to late reinforcement? Use a conditioned reinforcer.

In Behavior Basic #33 we discussed the fact that a child with autism needs pinpoint accuracy of reinforcement in order to know that he should do a behavior again. We cannot provide such speedy, accurate reinforcement with our slow voices or confusing gestures. An excellent way to provide fast, timely information to the child is with an acoustical signal, a tag (click sound), made by a tagger. The best way to reinforce a child is when he is actually doing the behavior you want -- to reinforce in that "right now" micro-second. How can you reinforce so quickly? With a TAGteach tagger. A tagger allows you to provide split-second information to the child while he is performing the desired behavior. So the procedure is:

observe child, tag desired behavior, give treat. By following up each tag with a treat, the tag becomes a “conditioned reinforcer.” When the child hears the tag, he knows a treat is coming his way. Eventually, the sound of the tag is reinforcing in and of itself. He learns to listen for the tag, think about what he was doing that earned the tag, and then perform the behavior again -- because it brought about a pleasant consequence. Precise, timely reinforcement builds behaviors faster. There is nothing else like it.

Behavior Basics #35

A *conditioned reinforcer* is something previously neutral that has gained reinforcing potential.

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A conditioned reinforcer is something previously neutral that has gained reinforcing potential.

A conditioned reinforcer can be any quick sound or action. It can be a whistle, a tap on the shoulder, a flash of light, or a click sound made by a small plastic device called a tagger. Initially, the sound or flash has no significance for a child, but, by pairing the sound with a treat or other pleasing consequence, the tag (click sound) becomes an important event for the child. The tag means that a treat is coming. A tag means that the child did something right or achieved something. The tag is good news! The tag is worth paying attention to – this is very important. The tag teaches the child to focus on his own actions. “What was I just doing that caused Mom to tag and hand me a treat? Was it swinging my

arm or looking at the toy? Hmmm, I'll try swinging my arm again. Nothing, no tag. Okay, I'll try looking at the toy again. TAG! Oh, that was it! I get it. I'll look at the toy some more! Boy, Mom sure seems happy when I look at a toy. I know she's happy because she tagged and gave me a treat, and I'm happy too."

Behavior Basics #36

Create a **conditioned reinforcer** by **pairing** it with something good that the child already **likes**.

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Create a conditioned reinforcer by pairing it with something the child already likes.

How does the child learn that the acoustical signal, the tag (click sound) has meaning? You teach the child by “pairing” the tag with a treat. This can be achieved very quickly. When I first got a tagger, I sat down next to my son with a fruit roll-up and proceeded to tag and hand over slivers of fruit roll-up. It went like this: tag/hand over sliver, tag/hand over sliver, tag/hand over sliver, continuously. In 25 seconds he figured out that the tag meant that a treat was coming. 25 seconds! That’s all it took. I never had to repeat that lesson. I could immediately start using the tag to teach new skills. Try it! It’s great fun to teach a child with autism something in just 25 seconds!

Behavior Basics #37

*Good candidates for
conditioned reinforcers
are a short, sharp
sound, flash of light,
quick hand signal.*

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Good candidates for conditioned reinforcers are a short, sharp sound, flash of light, quick hand signal.

In Behavior Basic #30, we discussed how the TIMING of the reinforcer is information for the child. Specific, precise, timely reinforcement builds behaviors faster than slow, late reinforcement. How can you deliver split second reinforcement in a real-time setting? With a conditioned reinforcer that is short, sharp and fast. The best reinforcers are a short, sharp sound, a quick flash of light, or a quick hand signal. The TAGteach tagger is an ideal tool for several reasons. It can mark a split second of behavior the moment it occurs, and, it is light, portable and low cost. It is easy to use: with a quick press of the thumb, the metal tab makes a click sound: the child knows instantly that he has accomplished

the tag point and will soon be getting a treat. It is simple, easy, and effective. Taggers are available from www.tagteach.com, and cost about \$1.50.

Behavior Basics # 38

Use a *conditioned reinforcer* to reinforce *immediately* after the behavior, follow up with the candy, sticker etc.

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Use a conditioned reinforcer immediately after the behavior – follow with the candy, stickers, etc.

Use the conditioned reinforcer, such as the TAGteach tagger (or clicker), and mark the behavior immediately after the child has achieved the tag point. The more closely the desired behavior and reinforcer are paired, the faster the child will learn. This simple, fast process of tag and treat, tag and treat, is a great way to build behaviors faster, plus, it is pleasant for the child.

Behavior Basics # 39

*A conditioned
reinforcer must be
clear, precise and
consistent.*

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A conditioned reinforcer must be clear, precise and consistent.

In Behavior Basics 37 and 38, we discussed how a sharp, quick sound or flash of light is the best tool for “marking” a behavior. With the press of a finger, a TAGteach tagger can precisely mark even a split second of a desired behavior. But why is consistency important? Let’s remember that the tag (or click) sound is a “conditioned” reinforcer. The definition of the word conditioned states that the object is characterized by predictable or consistent patterns. There are two features of the tag that we want to be consistent for the learner: (1) the tag means success! The child did something right, and (2) the tag means a reinforcer (treat, reward) is coming. When a child knows that the tag always

means these two things, she has a great strategy for learning: just listen, pay attention, try again, feel free to experiment, and enjoy all the reinforcements delivered during the process. The tag creates a path forward for the child because it always and only means those two things – success and reinforcement.

Part 6: Conditioned Reinforcers



A great conditioned reinforcer for a child with autism is a click sound.

A click sound is an excellent conditioned reinforcer because of the features mentioned above in Behavior Basic 39: it is quick, precise and consistent. The click (or tag) predictably means two things: success and reinforcement. Another feature of the click is that because of its precision and speed, it can only mark one small behavior (physical movement of the body) at a time. This feature ensures that the child will not be asked to do something that is too complex for her. The tag can only mark one movement, not two or three, so the

instructor or teacher has to think about a task carefully and break it down into small steps that the child can do. This protects the child from being overwhelmed with difficult demands. With time and experience, the child develops trust that she will only be presented with a task she can comfortably perform, and only for the length of time that she can comfortably perform it. The click sound is the best sound because it is quick, precise and targeted.

Behavior Basics #41

*Tag **once** to reinforce
a desired behavior.*

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Tag once to reinforce a desired behavior.

In previous Behavior Basics we have discussed how a click sound is an excellent conditioned reinforcer because the sound is quick, precise and immediate. The sound “catches” a physical movement by the child at the instant he performs it, so the child gets specific information that he has achieved the goal, i.e., he has achieved success! But, how often to tag? This is easy, just once for a desired physical movement. When the child performs the desired action, also referred to as the “tag point,” one tag is all that is needed. As soon as possible after the tag, give the child a reinforcer. If the child performs the tag point again, tag once at that time. One tag is all it takes!

Behavior Basics #42

Tag *immediately* to reinforce a desired behavior.

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Tag immediately to reinforce a desired behavior.

We know from the ABCs of behavioral science (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence) that the all-important consequence determines the future course of a behavior. A positive consequence causes a behavior to occur again, and eventually causes it to occur for a longer time. The more closely the behavior and positive consequence match up in real time, the more effective the consequence is in strengthening that behavior. The ideal consequence would occur while the learner is performing the desired action. Reinforcing during the behavior tells the learner, "This is it! This is right!" It's a powerful and positive experience for the learner, and cements that action in his consciousness. The

best way to time a consequence this precisely is with a quick, sharp sound, like the click sound of a TAGteach tagger. So, watch your learner closely, tag immediately to reinforce a desired behavior. If possible, tag while the learner is performing the tag point!

Behavior Basics #43

*If a behavior
deteriorates **strengthen**
it with an intensive
course of **reinforcement**.*

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If a behavior deteriorates, strengthen it with an intensive course of reinforcement.

Sometimes a child (any child, with a disability or without) may appear to have forgotten a skill. The child no longer says "Thank you," or stops flushing the toilet, or goes back to kicking the seat in the car. The solution to this is simple: go back to reinforcing the desired behavior. To revive the thank-yous, whenever you give the child a desired item, say "thank you" yourself and look at the child with the expectation that he will say it. As soon as he says, "thank you," tag and give a reward. Do this intensively for a while and the thank-yous will return. For other problems, set the relevant tag points: Flush or Feet Down in Car, and tag and reinforce the child every time he performs the desired behaviors. Since the child

already knew these behaviors, they will come back with an intensive course of reinforcement. When the child is performing the behaviors again, switch from a continuous reinforcement schedule (reinforcing every time) to a variable, intermittent schedule (reinforcing 1 out of 2 times, then 2 out of 3, then 2 out of 4, and so forth, until you are reinforcing only every 5th or 8th or 12th time). Keep up the variable intermittent schedule, and the behavior will stay nicely in place. So, if a behavior erodes, go back to the beginning and build it back up with intensive reinforcement.

Resources and Additional Information

Learn how to use TAGteach to teach many skills and functional behaviors to a child with autism with the book by Martha Gabler: **Autism Chaos to Calm - Discovering Solutions to the Everyday Problems of Living with Autism:**

<http://goo.gl/vm7dgX>

Read articles and download free resources from Martha at her website: <http://autismchaostocalm.com/>

Learn more about TAGteach for autism:

[http://tagteach.com/Autism and Special Education](http://tagteach.com/Autism_and_Special_Education)

Watch a free video series from Martha:

<https://tagteachblog.com/martha-parent-video-series/>

Take Martha's online course

<https://tagteach.com/TAGteach-for-Autism-Online-Course>

Take a FREE online course on TAGteach Fundamentals:

<https://tagteach.com/Free-TAGteach-course>