Part II: Prioritizing During a Crisis – More Small Changes that Make a BIG Difference
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The previous article described several ideas for prioritizing activities to teach your children with complex learning and communication needs during the current pandemic. Your efforts should be applauded and I am confident that your learners are gaining independence with several new skills. Once you have worked on implementing the base elements of the [Pyramid Approach to Education®](#) (functional activities, reinforcement, communication, and contextually inappropriate behavior), it is time to begin addressing the top elements of the Pyramid. These elements address some of the finer details to make your lessons more effective.

Where is this skill going? Imagine only being able to read words on flashcards at school with a teacher. Though it's nice that you can read these single words, you would miss out on reading some lovely stories, street signs, or recipes. So, for any skill you are teaching, remember to vary the people, places, and things. For example, when working on reading at home, remember to introduce different materials like books, magazines, or recipes. If possible, have the learner read to all available caregivers, as well as siblings. And, work on reading during different activities such as snack preparation, leisure time, and outside when you're on a walk.

Another type of change that is important to build into teaching involves aiming for differences in the performance itself. For example, while getting dressed independently is an important skill, getting dressed within 10 minutes is much better than doing it in 30 minutes. Or, while a learner may read each word accurately, if the pace of reading a sentence or paragraph is too slow, then it is difficult for a reader to comprehend the information. So, with all skills, try to vary the pace, duration, or complexity over time.

What is the lesson type? Our days consist of completing both short and long activities. For instance, when we brush our teeth, wash our hands, and make the bed, these longer activities consist of a series of small steps that are required for the activity be completed. We refer to these lesson types as sequential lessons. When teaching our learners sequential lessons, it's important to identify the steps involved in each activity. We refer to the process of identifying each step in a sequential lesson as a task analysis. Task analyses are helpful to ensure that we are teaching activities the same way each time. There are lots of great task analyses in *The Pyramid Approach to Education: Lesson Plans for Young Children* available for purchase [here](#).

Other times, our activities are short and sweet – so, we call these activities or lessons discrete trials. Discrete trials can include things like matching one red sock with the other red sock. Or, these lessons can also include math facts, responding to a variety of questions and/or following a basic direction like, "Stand up".

When working with our learners at home, it's helpful to identify times when we are working on discrete versus sequential lessons because this identification will guide our error correction strategy that will be described a bit later in this article. It is also important to identify who will lead the lesson. Given formal instruction, the teacher often goes first by asking a question or giving a direction. But, if we can follow

the learner's lead, this can be a powerful teaching approach. For instance, if the leaner is reaching towards his favorite toy car, we could briefly place the item out of reach, so that the learner has a chance to ask for the item.

How do I teach my child to learn a new skill? Think of a time when you have tried to learn a new skill or hobby. When I was first learning to ski as an adult, I had experienced several unsuccessful attempts. Watching other people swish down the slopes didn't seem to help nor did the instructions from my spouse. It was only after a lesson with a ski instructor who essentially physically moved my legs and body into the correct position, that I could successfully ski down the bunny slope. How does this apply to our learners? For any new skill we are teaching, it can be expected that our learners will need some help or assistance. We term this help a "prompt." Prompts can be many different flavors. We can give instructions, show the learner how to perform the skill, point to the materials, or physically guide them through the lesson.

Let's say you are teaching your learner to wash their hands. There are a few golden rules for prompting:

1. Select a single prompt type. For example, you could choose to physically guide your learner through the steps of handwashing.
2. Make sure not to combine prompts. We would not suggest guiding and pointing and saying the steps all at the same time.
3. Avoid repeating prompts. Telling your learner to wash their hands fourteen times at an increasing volume is not likely to be effective. Rather, a single appropriately selected prompt should be effective in helping to learn the skill.
4. All prompts must be eliminated. Any help you put into the lesson must ultimately be taken out. This helps to ensure independence with any new skill.

What if my learner makes a mistake? We all make mistakes sometimes. What is important is how we respond when these errors occur during our lessons. Sometimes we find ourselves just fixing a mistake because we don't have the time or energy to engage in a formal teaching lesson…and that's okay! But, whenever possible we want to use error correction strategies. Don't worry if this seems difficult at first. Even veteran professionals sometimes have difficulty learning to implement error correction procedures. Let's take the example during a short and sweet discrete lesson when your learner places the spoon with the knives in the silverware organizer. Sometimes, if you are already running late for dinner, you might just throw the spoon with the other spoons. Here you would have simply fixed the error. Whenever possible, especially during structured learning times, you can use the 4-Step Error Correction listed below:

Step	What do I do?	Example
1. Model	Show the learner the correct response	Place the spoon with the other spoons
2. Practice	Have the learner demonstrate the correct response	Have the learner place the spoon with the other spoons
3. Switch	Have the learner do something else that they can do quickly and easily	Have the learner clap their hands, follow another easy direction, or simply pause to distract away from the drawer
4. Repeat	Start again	Give the spoon to the learner and wait to see what happens. If the placement is correct, be sure to let the learner know about their success!

But, what about those longer sequential lessons? Imagine your learner drops their sweater on the floor and runs over to play in the family room. Later when you notice the sweater, you say, "Go pick up your sweater!" In so doing, your child learns to wait until you tell them when to pick up the sweater. Instead, whenever possible, silently guide the learner back to the sweater and place it on the arm where it was located right before it dropped to the floor. From there, help the learner to finish the sequence of hanging the sweater in the closet (or wherever the sweater should live). When we follow this process of bringing the learner back to the place he/she was last correct, this is what is referred to as a Backstep Error Correction Procedure. This is a powerful way to teach all learners the correct sequence within an activity.

How do I know if the lesson is working? We want to make sure that all these important things we are doing to promote learning are actually effective. The only way to know for sure is to collect data. Data collection systems can often seem cumbersome or overwhelming. So, start small. For instance, you might simply start by counting how many pieces of silverware your learner correctly sorted. As you gain practice, you might start to investigate other intricacies like noting independence with each step of your task analysis. If you have access to other members of the educational team, consider discussing the types of data collection systems that might show progress on your learner's goals and objectives. For sample PECS data sheets visit https://pecsusa.com/free-materials/ (free data sheet downloads are available under the *Information on PECS* tab).

Summary: We know that this is a difficult time for everyone, particularly for our families of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). We hope that these straightforward teaching descriptions are helpful for prioritizing the learning opportunities throughout the day.

For more information or to arrange consultation with one of our expert consultants, please contact Dave Battista, Director of Operations, at david@pecs.com.