

Encouraging Independence and Initiative

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One of the most challenging endeavors is getting a child with autism to be more independent and assertive. Professionals and parents agree that this goal is crucial, however many children with autism remain deficient in this area of independent functioning because of a lack of comprehensive understanding of each child's sensory, social and cognitive challenges. A complete functional profile is necessary to create effective approaches to treatment and education.

Goal setting processes need to include incremental steps that can be understood by the child. Over-focusing on the achievement of the goal can overshadow the importance of what is learned by the child in the steps leading towards goal achievement. The steps should be 1) visually clear, 2) at the appropriate cognitive level, and 3) within the current physical and emotional profile of the child. The mastery of the steps that lead towards goal fulfillment increases self-esteem and competence, which are essential components of becoming an initiating, more independent person.

Obstacles to Developing Independence in Children with Autism

The difficulty in developing self-perpetuating skills of independence for autistic children can be explained by understanding how the core deficits of the disorder affect all necessary capacities to be independent. The developmental areas most affected by autism are 1) language and communication, 2) social functioning, and 3) cognitive functioning. These reduced capacities limit or nullify the child's ability to tell others what they want or need, inhibit feelings of empathy towards others, and limit independent problem solving skills. Those limits, in turn, affect the child's ability to develop a plan that leads to action. It is important, therefore, for teachers, therapists and parents to develop processes or systems that take the child's deficit areas into consideration when setting goals for independent functioning. For example, if the goal for a child who has motor planning and sequencing problems is to be able to sit down at their desk and independently take out the appropriate supplies to start a task, the process should include incremental steps that lead to independence such as:

- Using a series of pictures which show the child doing each step of the task
- have the child watch another child model the action,
- have the child read directions about what to do from a cue card,
- have the child take out one item at a time and build up to more steps
- Have the child name the items he or she needs,
- have the child point to each item (with or without language)
- Use signing to guide actions

Any of the above steps begin to shape the behavior toward initiative and independence because they take into consideration physical, cognitive sensory and language strengths or weaknesses. Rewarding the child with positive reinforcement for each step they are able to master encourages repetition of the action and more unprompted, spontaneous behavior.

The Role of Language Acquisition

Have you ever noticed how talking affects your behavior? Think about a time when you found yourself taking action after telling someone how you felt about a situation. For example, sometimes after we express hurt, we may decide to leave a situation or ask a person for an apology. These independent, assertive actions are motivated by the words we express, as if those words were a map showing us what to do in certain circumstances. When we use words to clarify what we want or feel, we feel more empowered to take action. In that sense language is "self-prompting" in that it serves as a catalyst for independent action. We are driven to take initiative as a way of getting understood or having our needs met.

Goal plans developed for children with autism must include speech goals that teach assertive language as well as "self talk". The ability to turn words into communication to ourselves also strengthens our ability to figure out what to do, or what to say further to others. Self talk becomes the precursor to expressive language and speech therapists should include "self directing and self reflective" self-talk goals in the

treatment plan. For example, when a child wants to ask another child to share something with them, that child would be more inclined to ask if they had thoughts such as:

"Johnny is a nice boy."

"I will ask in a nice way."

"I will offer to share something with him."

"I will promise not to break it."

These self-assertions lessen anxiety, which in turn promotes less resistance to taking a verbal or physical action. For a child in the same situation with more limited cognitive and language abilities, the steps towards developing more independent communication and behavior might include:

Pointing to the desired item and saying, "please";

Having an adult verbally or physically model the request;

Teaching the child to say "Let's share";

Enjoying the desired item in joint play and saying "Thank you."

Writing the request on paper or having the child write the request

The more words or other forms of communication a child has the ability to use, the easier it will be for them to take the initiative towards getting what they want or need. Once that child begins to see that their words, signs or writings have an effect on getting what they want or need, he or she will become more motivated to use language for communication with others, and as a result will become more behaviorally assertive.

The Role of Social Functioning

When we are part of a group, we become motivated to act in ways that will gain the attention and acceptance of others in the group. Children with mild deficits will tend to take more initiative independently because they will be more aware of his/her own feelings and social needs, such as being liked and accepted. A child with some social intelligence will figure out that certain actions make people laugh or happy, and therefore, will be more likely to repeat those actions on his/her own in order to promote those responses from others. To encourage additional independent social behavior, these children should be helped to expand on their repertoire of social behavior and communication to develop more interesting and deeper connections to peers.

Children functioning at a lower level of cognitive and social awareness require additional supports to increase independence in social situations. Many of the social behaviors need to be modeled and paired with explanations appropriate to the child's level of understanding. For example, when you model saying "hello" for a child and pair it with a wave of the hand, you also explain to them that it is a friendly thing to do, and it makes people feel good and notice them. Pairing the action with the explanation increase the odds of a child adopting the behavior because taking action with their body and using language can increase the level of intention and involvement in the action.. This approach has been shown to awaken responsiveness in many children with autism, especially those who are having low affect or are hypotonic".

In order to promote interactions in group settings, it is helpful to set up scenarios where children depend on each other for completion of a task. For example, if one child has an item that another child needs to complete a task, there is an increased chance the one child will offer the item to the other, or the other child will request the item. Social settings are opportunities to promote independence because children can be taught they can help the group or complete the group in some meaningful way, simply because of an action they take.

The Role of Cognitive Development

One way in which cognitive functioning is measured is by the level of behavioral and emotional understanding shown in a situation. When a child understands the concept of what is happening, and understands his or her own feelings and the feelings of others, that child is more apt to take constructive, meaningful action. Without this clarity and accuracy of thought, children often shy away from taking the risks which go along with taking action. Autistic children with significant cognitive deficits 1) often lack the ability to know how to figure out what to do in a situation (problem solving deficits), 2) cannot project and anticipate what might happen next, 3) have difficulty developing alternate plans of action, and 4) have problems understanding their own feelings and the feelings of others.

The lack of independent action is directly related to not understanding a given situation, and what is expected of him or her in that situation. For example, if a child is accustomed to their teacher starting out the day by saying, "Let's get your materials out of your desks," he or she might be confused if a substitute teacher starts out the morning by saying, "Let's get started." That confusion will lead to inaction because it is not clear what is being asked of them to do. Using visual supports, gestures, and pairing words with actions are tools which are often necessary for a child to really understand what he or she is supposed to do.

All programs aimed at developing cognition should include strategies that teach *1) how to use the child's processing strengths to increase general comprehension and social intelligence, 2) problem solving skills to apply when something does not work out as planned, and 3) social learning skills that build confidence and competence in social settings.* When a child is taught a process for developing thoughts about what is happening in his or her environment, they become more able to figure out appropriate actions to take. Therefore, with more clarity and confidence, he or she becomes more independent. Examples of strategies which help develop such cognitive growth by challenging rote, rigid thinking are:

disrupting a pattern in the child's life so that he or she is required to think about what to do differently;
hiding needed items in strange and new places;
making a familiar sequence of behaviors more complicated; and
creating opportunities for all of these strategies to occur in new situations, in different places, and with different people.

Once autistic children learn that they have to think differently across multiple circumstances, cognitive growth is promoted.

Independent, initiating behavior is possible for children with autism. However, to achieve that goal it is necessary to build interventions with an understanding of the individual child's deficits and strengths in the major domains of language, social and cognitive functioning. Autism programs should emphasize building cognitive skills with well-defined strategies which encourage and support social learning and independent behavior. To do that requires patience, creativity, knowledge and flexibility by all who work with and live with these special children.

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