



ACHIEVING BREAKTHROUGHS BIG & SMALL

Generalization: The Key to Successful Learning

What if you could only drive your car on a familiar road to a single destination? The ability to be flexible about where you go and how to get there is crucial to driving effectively. That is true for every skill: It's only valuable if you can use it in familiar and new situations.

The ability to apply skills to new places, situations and people is called "generalization." Generalization is essential to effective learning for everyone, but it is especially important for children with autism.

Most neurotypical children generalize automatically. Kids with autism usually need to be taught how to apply a skill beyond the setting in which they learned it. For example, a child should learn to sit still at home, school and other places, and when asked by parents, babysitters, teachers and other adults.

Generalization is also critical to help kids with autism become more independent. A child who learns a behavior and can reliably use it many situations can go more places and interact with more people. As she gets older, the behavior and communication skills she masters can lead to new opportunities, experiences and friendships.

Generalization and ABA

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) uses positive reinforcement to help children with autism learn age-appropriate behavior, communication and social skills, and reduce challenging behavior.

ABA's effectiveness in helping children on the spectrum has been proven in more than 600 scientific studies. It is also the only autism treatment that has been approved by the U.S. Surgeon General and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Most parents look for an ABA provider that helps kids generalize skills in many locations, such as home and the playground, the doctor's office and so on. Many providers also have therapy centers, which create more opportunities for children to practice social skills with other kids.

Generalize for Independence

Generalization plays a fundamental role in helping kids with autism become more independent. A daily activity such as getting ready for bed may seem simple, but it requires a long list of skills. A child has to put on pajamas, use the toilet, wash her hands, brush her teeth and get in bed.

Each of these also involves many skills. Take tooth brushing: It requires putting a toothbrush in your mouth, accepting the taste and texture of toothpaste, brushing and rinsing.



What if a child learns to use only one toothbrush in one bathroom? Brushes wear out and need to be replaced. It's sometimes necessary to brush your teeth in a different location.

With ABA, a therapist divides the process of toothbrushing into small steps, such as holding the toothbrush, putting it in your mouth, getting used to toothpaste, brushing and so on. The therapist teaches the child each step and provides plenty of positive reinforcement for every success. The reward could be praise, a hug, a sticker, a small toy or something else the child likes.

Once a child can brush her teeth with one brush in one place, the therapist will slowly add new elements to the sequence: a new toothbrush, a different color or a new toothpaste. Then the therapist may introduce new locations, such as brushing in a different bathroom and at Grandma's house. When a child can brush her teeth using various toothbrushes in a number of places, she has effectively generalized the skill.

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Start Early for Best Results

There are many reasons to start intensive ABA therapy as early as possible. One is that younger children's brains are more "plastic," so they learn behaviors, communication and skills more easily.

Generalization is another reason to start ABA early. Younger children who have intensive ABA therapy often learn to generalize more quickly, and may need to spend less therapy time generalizing skills as they get older.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of teaching children with autism to generalize skills to new situations, environments and people. Without generalization, children will learn skills and behavior, but the result may be an age-appropriate version of being able to drive only on a familiar road to a single destination.

