

What is Incidental Teaching?

Incidental teaching is a type of teaching used in ABA therapy that follows similar learning principles as Discrete Trial Training, but occurs in a natural environment and the learning opportunity is initiated by the child's interest in an object or activity. Incidental teaching is called so because it takes advantage of naturally occurring "incidents" to teach important skills. Incidental teaching was initially recognized by Hart and Risley in 1978 and implemented as a method to increase language and improve social responses. It was primarily used among preschool-aged children. However, since its discovery, incidental teaching has been found applicable to a variety of skills across nearly every age group.

What Makes Incidental Teaching Effective?

- Incidental teaching capitalizes on child's highest interest, so child is very motivated.
- Incidental teaching typically happens in a natural environment. It helps child to generalize skills beyond the ABA therapy work environment and prepares child for when natural environment teaching happens later during program maintenance.
- It is an evidence-based practice. (See research below)

Five Steps

Apply these steps when looking for incidental teaching opportunities and implementing incidental teaching:

1. **Wait** for child to initiate teaching by indicating interest.
2. **Ask** child generic questions such as, "What do you need to do?", "What do you want/need?"
3. **Express** what you are expecting of child.
4. **Prompt** as needed.
5. **Reward** with access and praise.

(McGee, Daly, & Jacobs, 1994).

Supporting Research for Incidental Teaching

- **Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley** at the University of Kentucky implemented incidental teaching strategies to help children with autism learn to use compound sentences. After applying incidental teaching strategies for learning to use compound sentences while talking to teachers, subjects began using compound sentences directed toward teachers more frequently. When the same strategy was used involving talking to other children, subjects' use of compound sentences toward other children doubled.
- **Dennis J. Delprato: Comparisons of Discrete-Trial Normalized Behavioral Language Intervention for Young Children with Autism.** Ten controlled studies were reviewed which compared the results of traditional operant behavior procedures (involving highly structured, direct teaching sessions) to normalized language-teaching interventions that had been developed more recently (involving aspects of incidental teaching such as natural environments and child initiation). This review found that in the eight studies with results involving language criteria, methods similar to incidental teaching were actually more effective at improving language than more traditional, more structured methods.
- **H. Goldstein-Communication Intervention for Children with Autism.** About 60 studies examining multiple interventions for teaching language to children with ASD were reviewed. Interventions reviewed included incidental teaching and other natural-environment strategies, sign language, DTT, functional communication training, modeling/scripting interactions, and parent training. Incidental teaching and similar natural-environment strategies were found applicable for teaching language and about as affective as DTT.
- **McGee and Daly- Incidental teaching of age-appropriate social phrases to children with autism.** This study used incidental teaching approaches to facilitate the use of socially appropriate speech with peers in three young boys with autism. The incidental teaching of socially appropriate phrases, such as "All right." and "You know what?" led to immediate use of target phrases in subjects. Later, subjects who had been taught with incidental teaching strategies showed more use of target phrases while in social play situations.

Delprato, D.J. (2001). Comparisons of discrete-trial and normalized behavioral intervention for young children with autism. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 31, 315-325.

Goldstein, H. (2002). Communication intervention for children with autism: A review of treatment efficacy. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 32, 373-396.

McGee G. G. Daly T. (2007) Incidental teaching of age-appropriate social phrases to children with autism. Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities. 32(2), pp. 112-123 Read Abstract (New Window)

<http://www.lovass.com/meetingpoint-2007-04-article-02.php>

When and How Can Incidental Teaching Be Used To Teach? (Examples)

During Mealtime/Snacks

- While presenting desired food or drink, ask child, "What do you want?" or "What is this?" If prompt is required tell child desired response: "You can say, 'Cookie.'" "You can say, 'Juice'". Depending on child's level the word can be expanded to a phrase instead: "You can say, 'I want juice.'" Give desired food or drink after response (prompted or unprompted). [*Language skills, Imitation skills*]
- If child is working on use of utensils and usually requires help, use opportunity to encourage independence. Refrain from help initially, encouraging child to attempt on own, and prompt as necessary. [*Adaptive and self-help skills, Language skills*]
- Hand child napkin or cloth after eating and ask child to clean up face/hands. Prompt only as necessary. [*Adaptive and self-help skills*]
- Encourage language use and choice-making by setting out multiple options of food and drink and saying, "Tell me what you want" or "Pick one." Prompt as necessary by saying "You can say, 'I want this'" or "You can do..." followed by pointing or using PECS or signs. [*Language skills*]
- Involve children in cooking and baking. [*Adaptive and self-help skills*] Ask child to help measure ingredients, place ingredients where they should go, stir mixes, use utensils, place batter on cookie sheet, etc. [*Fine and gross motor skills*] Practice figuring out times for cooking and baking and setting timers. [*Adaptive and self-help skills, Math skills*]

At School

- Facilitate interaction with peers during appropriate times. Prompt with suggestions for starting or responding to conversation: "You can say, 'Hi!'" "You can ask, 'Can I play?'" Encourage child to expand on conversations. [*Play/Social Skills, Language Skills*]
- Encourage sharing with peers and practice turn-taking. [*Play/Social Skills*]
- Practice cleaning up after self and putting things away appropriately in cubby, locker, bins, etc. [*Adaptive and Self-Help Skills*]
- If child needs help with an assignment, before helping, allow child opportunity to request the help appropriately with words, signs, PECS, or communicative device. Prompt as necessary and help after it has been requested. [*Language skills*]
- When child needs help from teacher, prompt appropriate attention-getting strategies. This could mean prompting child to raise hand, telling child "You can ask for help", encouraging use of "inside voice".
- Consistently positively reinforce child for waiting his/her turn, sitting nicely, raising hand, appropriately asking for assistance, and other appropriate classroom behaviors to encourage child to continue using these behaviors.

During Play

- Set out a variety of child's favorite toys. See which toy child gravitates toward. Place toy a certain distance away from child under your control. Prompt child to use words, PECS, or signs to request toy by gesturing toward PECS book, showing appropriate sign, or saying, "You can say 'Teddy bear'" or "You can say 'car'". Give child toy and engage after communication is used. [*Language skills*]
- Use puzzles, stringing beads, or other start-to-finish tasks during play if child enjoy these. [Visual/Spatial skills] Remove a few puzzle pieces or beads and prompt child to use words, PECS, or signs to request these when they are needed. [*Language skills*]
- If child enjoys books, encourage reading with them. Ask while reading, "What is this word?" or "What is this letter?" [Language skills, Academic skills] Or ask child to point to certain pictures in book [Fine motor skills] or certain colors or shapes in book [*Fine motor skills, Visual/Spatial skills*] while reading.
- While reading, ask social questions about the story: "How does this character feel?" "Is this a big problem or a little problem?" "What should the character do?" "What does the character feel happy/upset?" [Language Skills, Play/Social Skills]
- Find songs child enjoys singing, particularly ones that have accompanying motions. After singing song a few times, leave out certain words and encourage child to fill in missing words. [Language skills] Prompt child to imitate accompanying motions. [*Imitation skills, Gross and fine motor skills*]
- Encourage and engage in pretend play. [*Play/Social skills*]
- Engage in games or activities that involve turn-taking. [*Play/Social skills*]
- Model appropriate toy play and prompt child to imitate. [*Imitation skills, Play/Social skills*]
- Ask child to match identical or similar toys during play [*Visual/Spatial skills*] or to label colors and shapes of items. [*Language skills*]
- Play Simon Says or a similar game and perform tasks that involve balance and motor coordination, such as touching nose or head, standing on one foot, jumping, waving arms, etc. [*Imitation skills, Gross and fine motor skills*]
- Use pretend play (with or without use of objects/toys) to practice sequences of events. Play out social scenes and ask, "What should happen next?" [*Visual/Spatial skills, Play/Social skills*]
- If child enjoys playing with blocks or Legos, put them in a certain formation and ask child to copy your formation. [*Visual/Spatial skills*]
- Encourage coloring. [Academic skills, Fine motor skills] While coloring ask child, "What color is this?" or "Which one is the blue crayon?" [*Visual/Spatial skills, Language skills*]
- Practice writing letters/numbers/name using various utensils: Chalk on a chalkboard, fat markers or crayons, finger paints. These utensils are fun and a good starting point for younger children still working on fine motor control. Once child has mastered these utensils and is improving in fine motor control, use skinner markers or crayons, pencils, pens, etc. [*Fine Motor Skills, Language Skills, Academic Skills*]

Community Outings

At The Store

- Ask child to label items while in store or request an item they would like. [*Language skills*]
- For older children, you can use grocery store trips as an opportunity to encourage children to pick out foods independently, plan and stick to a budget while shopping, and count out and use money to purchase items. [*Adaptive and Self-Help Skills, Vocational Skills*]
- Ask child what he/she wants to eat for dinner. Give multiple choices. Pick something different and prompt a conversation that will lead to a compromise. [*Behavior and Emotional Regulation, Play/Social Skills*]

At The Park

- Swings, slides, and monkey bars are all great and fun equipment to practice gross motor skills on. These activities can help strengthen muscles and improve gross motor skills. These skills can also be practiced by running, walking, chasing, playing tag. [*Gross motor skills*]
- Consistently positively reinforce child for safe play, in order to encourage safe behaviors. [*Behavior and Emotional Regulation*]

Out To Eat

- Encourage and reward appropriate sitting at dinner. [*Attending skills*]
- Ask child to read items on menu. [*Language skills, Reading skills*]
- Give child opportunity to make choices about what to eat [*Language skills, Reading skills*] and point to item he or she wants. [*Fine motor skills*]
- Allow child to attempt to use utensils independently if he or she does not usually. Prompt as necessary. [*Adaptive and self-help skills*]
- Public settings are a great time to practice behavioral and emotional regulation skills. Perhaps child does not like riding in car, crowded stores, sitting in cart, sitting still at meals, etc. Make sure to be prepared with repertoire of coping mechanisms and encourage child to use these when he/she becomes upset, wants to run away, or engages in other problematic behaviors. This could be saying, "You can use your words and say, 'I'm mad'" or "You can say, 'I want to play'" followed by a verbal solution for calming down. It could be prompting child to appropriately request items or actions. It could be using a visual schedule to remind child of schedule: for example, "First store, then park" or "First sit nicely at dinner, then we can go home and watch movies". [*Behavioral and Emotional Regulation*]

Around the Home

- Encourage child to clean up after self. Make cleaning fun and reinforcing by turning it into a game or singing songs. [*Adaptive and Self-help skills*] Practice using verbal directives such as "pick up", "put in", "clean up" or any applicable directives. [*Language skills*]
- Include child (typically older children) on more advanced cleaning tasks: Sweeping, vacuuming, putting dishes in dishwasher, dusting. Positively reinforce independence on these tasks.
- Involve child in cooking and baking. [*Gross and fine motor skills, Adaptive and Self-Help skills*]
- Positively reinforce child every time he/she turns a light or TV off when leaving a room. [*Adaptive skills*]
- Ask child to receptively or expressively label items: "Where is the refrigerator?" "Where do we keep the snacks?" "Where is the couch?" "What is this called?" [*Language Skills*]

Waking Up and Bedtime Routines

- Practice independent washing and self-care in bath. If child normally requires assistant to wash, hand him or her washcloth and have one of your own. Say, "Do this" and demonstrate washing face and body. Prompt as necessary.
- Encourage independent dressing whenever possible: taking off pajamas, putting on clothes for the day, taking off clothes, putting on pajamas.
- For parents: When you are getting ready for the day or getting ready for bed and are washing your face and brushing your teeth, hand child a cloth/toothbrush and encourage independent imitation of what you are doing. [*Adaptive and self-help skills, imitation skills*]
- Practice desensitization of sleeping with lights off (if this is something child struggles with) by staying in room with lights off for increasing periods of time around bedtime.
- After waking up, when getting ready for school/day care/work/other events of the day, probe child through morning routine. "We are breakfast, what do we do next? That's right, we brush our teeth!" "What do we do now that we have showered? You can say, 'We get dressed!'". Follow a similar routine when getting ready for bed. [*Language Skills, Adaptive/Self-Help Skills*]

These are just a few examples of how to use incidental teaching in ABA therapy. Always be on the lookout to present opportunities for a child to practice necessary skills both in and out of session and this will lead to effective incidental teaching!