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PROMOTING LEARNING FOR INDIVIDUALS

**Determining What to Teach
Determining How to Teach New Skills
Creating a Positive Learning Situation**

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PROMOTING LEARNING FOR INDIVIDUALS

When individuals with disabling conditions learn to do things on their own, it increases their competence and their sense of independence. The teenager on the bus who can use an iPod, the adult who knows how to use a digital camera, and the woman in her apartment who grinds fresh coffee for her guests, all show the value of having learned specific skills. Too often individuals with disabling conditions are only taught simple skills. We need to have high expectations about what individuals can learn. As a Direct Support Provider (DSP) you may have the opportunity to support individuals to learn new skills.

In this section we have clustered together a variety of ideas that will support DSPs to be more confident in assisting people to learn. These include:

- ◆ Determining What to Teach
- ◆ Determining How to Teach New Skills
- ◆ Creating a Positive Learning Situation

DETERMINING WHAT TO TEACH AN INDIVIDUAL

When you begin working with an individual, you may be faced with uncertainty about how to assist him or her to learn new things.

Consider Sam's Situation:

Sam is thirty-five years old and he lives with his parents. Currently he works in a day program where he assembles camping equipment and packages small items in plastic bags. At a recent planning meeting, Sam's parents, who are getting older, expressed concern about what would happen to Sam in the future. They would like him to get a job where he can make more money. They would also like him to move into an apartment either on his own or with a roommate. Currently Sam takes the bus to and from the day program and at home he helps out with jobs such as cutting the grass and shoveling snow. He spends most of his evenings in his room watching DVDs. He sometimes seems lonely and he has commented to his mother that he has no friends.

If we look at Sam's situation from a learning perspective there are several areas we could address. We could look at employment possibilities, recreational skills, friendships, and apartment living.

In considering what to teach, ask yourself the following

- *Is this a skill the person wants to learn?*
- *Does the skill occur in community settings?*
- *Does the skill increase interaction with others?*
- *Does the skill increase the learner's competence and open new doors?*

Below are some basic skills Sam has indicated he wants to learn:

- Paying for items with INTERAC
- Using a phone – possibly a cell phone, to contact others
- Shopping for groceries
- Doing his laundry
- Cooking basic meals

Below is an example of how learning a skill will benefit Sam.

Paying for Items with INTERAC:

- It takes place in a **community setting**.
- It will **increase his independence** because he will be able to make his own purchases.
- It **increases his competence** as it helps him to feel comfortable with technology.
- It is a skill Sam has **chosen to learn**



Learning to pay for items with INTERAC is a worthwhile skill for Sam. It is important that his time is not wasted learning things he does not want or need to know. In assisting someone to learn it is important to focus on meaningful skills that relate to personal goals.

DETERMINING HOW TO TEACH NEW SKILLS:

1 The first step in helping someone else to learn a skill, is to make sure YOU know it well. In the INTERAC example above, practice all of the steps in using INTERAC before you show Sam.

2 Make a list of each step in the task

For Example

- ▶ Give INTERAC card to store clerk
- ▶ Clerk swipes the card, Sam waits for information on screen
- ▶ Sam presses the appropriate account button
- ▶ Sam enters PIN code on the keypad ensuring security
- ▶ Sam waits for a verification
- ▶ Sam retrieves the INTERAC card

Sometimes there might be variations to the list above. For example, Sam might have to swipe his own card, or he may be asked if he wants cash back. If needed, be sure to include these steps in your list. This process is called **task analysis** and it is a proven method of assisting individuals to learn complex tasks.

You may also want to use one PIN number for teaching purposes and then change it to ensure Sam's privacy. Perhaps some individuals may want to avoid shopping during peak business hours as it may be more stressful using the INTERAC machine. Cashiers and patrons may be more supportive during slower periods.

3 Teaching the skill.

Before you go to the store with Sam, be sure he has his bank card. There are several options for teaching him.

- a) **Role Model:** Make a purchase immediately before Sam so that you model all of the steps for him.
- b) **Verbal Prompt:** Provide spoken directions to Sam at each step of the task.
- c) **Guiding:** Point or gesture towards the next step in the process.
- d) **Hand over Hand:** Guide Sam's hand with your hand through each step of the process.
- e) **"No news is good news"** approach. If Sam is doing well don't interrupt him with information. Only intervene when Sam is about to make an error.



At all times remain focused on the task at hand. Don't distract the learner with chit-chat when he is trying to focus. While Sam is learning, do the task in exactly the same way each time it is repeated. If Sam is having difficulty with one particular step, it may be necessary to break that step down into smaller steps.

- 4** **Fade your support as Sam proceeds to do the task more independently.** Physically move away so that eventually he is doing the task on his own.

These four steps represent a starting point; a way to begin teaching new skills to people with disabling conditions.



CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING SITUATION

The following concepts will help you to create situations where both you and the individual you support are open to learning.

1 Acknowledge individuals when they are doing something well

Provide encouragement to the person you support when they are being kind to others, or concentrating on their tasks, or helping with a job. These kinds of interactions help to build the individual's self-esteem and allow them to be more open to learning.



2 Role model

Always be a positive role model for the person you support. Regularly show:

- ◆ How you respect others
- ◆ How you deal with anger
- ◆ How you apologize when you've done something wrong
- ◆ How you learn something new
- ◆ How you problem solve

Imitation is a powerful learning strategy. Your role modeling can help the individual to learn important skills.

3 High Expectations

Have high expectations for the learning potential of the individual you support. Holding low expectations will limit the kind and quality of opportunities offered to individuals.

Statements like the following reflect low expectations:

- ▶ “I can **never** take Joe to the baseball game because he will misbehave”
- ▶ “Lily will **never** learn the alphabet”

They signal that opportunities like a community outing or learning something educational will not be offered to the individual. The result may be that the person will, in fact, not learn.

On the other hand, if you hold high expectations and believe people can take part and learn, you are more likely to provide the opportunities that will make this happen.

4 Build Competence

If the person you support can do something for themselves, they should be encouraged to do so. For example, if you are at a restaurant and the individual you are with can eat on their own and pay on their own, ensure that they do this. When individuals do things on their own it may take longer. But, these kinds of opportunities build competence and self-esteem, so are worth the extra time required.

5

Assume that Individuals Need Attention

“They’re just doing it to get attention.” This is a statement that is sometimes used to explain away the actions and wishes of individuals with disabling conditions. In fact, attention is something we all need. If we choose to ignore people who need our attention we make it necessary for them to do something unusual just to get us to notice them.

You may hear statements like:

“He is always pulling at my shirt sleeve to get me to talk to him.”

“Don’t pay any attention to her, she cries all the time.”

These statements show that the legitimate need that individuals have for attention is not being recognized. As a DSP try to ensure that individuals have many positive sources of attention like: friends, family, and acquaintances. If people are getting the attention they need from these relationships, they are less likely to “seek” attention in unusual or inappropriate ways.

So . . .

There are many ways to help individuals with disabling conditions to learn and grow. The key thing to remember is that learning is possible **for all individuals**. The challenge for those in support roles is to have the patience and commitment to allow people to learn.

Resources

Books:

DiLeo, D., & Nisbet, J. (1989). **Enhancing the Lives of Adults with Disabilities**. New Hampshire Division of Mental Health & Developmental Services: The Institute on Disability.

Video and Workbook Series:

Brown, V., & Brown, H. (1988). **Bringing People Back Home: Teaching new skills**. London: South East Thames Regional Health Authority and ESCATA.

Gold, M. W. (1980). **Try Another Way** video series.

Teaching People with Developmental Disabilities. (1988). Oregon Research Institute. This is a four video series developed with grants from United States Department of Education, Special Education Branch. (ISBN 0-87822-316-9)