

Developing Skills in Natural Ways

Why is it important to embed instruction within naturally occurring activities?

Beginning as far back as the early 1980s, early childhood educators have emphasized the value of using naturally occurring activities as teaching opportunities. Naturally occurring activities can be daily routines, an activity that a child initiates, or an activity planned by a teacher.

Research shows that learning opportunities are likely to be more meaningful when they take place within familiar events in the child's life, rather than when they are formally structured by an adult. When the task is meaningful to the child, the child is more likely to be motivated to attempt a new skill or practice to improve. In addition, when a child learns a skill in a naturally occurring activity, he or she is more likely to use that skill again.

In the "old way" a teacher, parent or therapist might begin by thinking, "I need to work with Sara on using a pincer grasp. What activity can I plan for her that will provide opportunities for her to use a pincer grasp?" In the "new way" the adult would be more likely to think, "Sara can participate in more play and self-help activities if she learns to pick up small objects. What activities occur during the day or in natural activities, during which picking up small objects using a pincer grasp will be useful and rewarding to her?"

Adults working with children on skill development often ask...

How can I work on individual skills with one child without pulling that child aside to work one-on-one, especially when the other children don't need to work on that skill?

Consider the following:

- Is the skill going to be useful and meaningful to the child right away?
- When during the day is that skill most likely to be used/needed?
- When do other children who have the skill use it?
- When (what time of day or during what activity) will the child be most motivated to use the skill?

When a skill is useful it is likely that other children already use the skill or they are also learning the skill. This makes it more likely that an activity the children already do involves that skill. Think about when that skill is likely to be useful to all of the children. When other children are participating in the activity there will be more opportunities for you to work with individual children without planning a separate activity or time to do so.

Another question often asked is...

What if opportunities do not occur naturally? How do I provide enough opportunities without going back to adult-directed activities?

Consider the following:

- What activities occur naturally in other settings that could be incorporated into your setting?
- What typical child interests, activities or games require that skill or an approximation of it?
- Could an activity be expanded to incorporate that skill in a way that would be meaningful and motivating to the children?

In their book *An Activity-Based Approach to Early Intervention, Third Edition*, Kristi Prett-Frontczak and Dianne Bricker say, "learning opportunities need to be relevant or meaningful to children for them to benefit from the learning opportunity. Useful learning opportunities should match the child's current developmental abilities, be tailored to his or her interests and prompt the child to practice target goals within the context of authentic activities or transactions." This book is available at the North Carolina Early Intervention Library: (www.ncei-eclibrary.org.) It's an excellent resource with clear descriptions, practical examples and suggestions, as well as reproducible forms! **ATN!**



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