

## Social Skills, continued

perform skills, students need reminders and coaching to perform their new skills in natural settings. In Bellini et al.'s (2007) review of skills training studies, coaching in natural situations was often a missing ingredient in social skills training efforts and one of the reasons for mediocre results.

### 5. Peer sensitivity training: Target typical peers as necessary to increase generalization, reduce isolation, increase opportunities for friendship and decrease bullying.

When students with autism have limited interactions with their peers, or worse yet are being teased, it is crucial that training of "typical" peers become part of the social skills intervention. Peers can be taught to be "helpers" or coaches to students with autism during play or work (Dunn, 2005). They can also be taught to be good "bystanders" by taking a protective role when their disabled peers are teased or bullied (Baker, 2003; 2005).

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# Autism Matters

YAI Network  
Serving People with Disabilities and their Families

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## Straight from the Experts: Tips for Parents

*If being a parent is a monumental challenge, being the parent of a child with an autism spectrum disorder is an even more formidable undertaking. Being a parent is a work in progress and no parent is born with all the tools needed to guide and raise a child on the spectrum. Here, renowned experts on YAI's Autism Advisory Council share tips they have acquired through decades of working with people on the spectrum and their families.*



**Fred R. Volkmar, M.D.**

*Dr. Volkmar is the Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Psychiatry, Pediatrics, and Psychology and Director of the Yale University Child Study Center, Yale University School of Medicine. He is also the Chief of Child Psychiatry at Yale-New Haven Hospital, New Haven, CT. For additional tips and other information see A Practical Guide to Autism by Fred Volkmar and Lisa Wiesner (Wiley, 2009).*

- Know your child's strengths and vulnerabilities. Use the former to address the latter. For example, children with autism often profit from use of visual supports (schedules) and other strategies that use their strengths in visual processing to help with learning. Children with Asperger's may profit from use of verbal medication and explicit listing of rules.
- Work on organizational skills. People with social vulnerabilities are prone to organization troubles (what psychologists call executive function difficulties). At every level of ability, there are steps that can be taken to help. This spans the range of visual schedules, computers (spell checking and schedulers) and organizational software like Inspiration.com (Kidspiration).
- Parents should be educated consumers of care and service. Don't be misled by promises of miracles and simple fixes. Children with autism can and so often make substantial progress but this is often hard work and you are in it for the long haul.
- Have a good primary care doctor and dentist and use them for routine well child care. This way, the doctor or dentist can get

familiar with the child when he or she is not sick and it helps the child be more comfortable with the office and doctor when they are ill. Do not skip regular dental checkups – this catches up later in life when adolescents and adults need general anesthesia for routine procedures.

- Work on generalization of skills. The learning styles of people with autism are often such that people learn things in isolation or in whole chunks. As a result, generalization of skills to real world settings can be a problem. Parents, siblings, family members and peers can help generalize skills from school to home and from home to community settings.
- Encourage appropriate and enjoyable outside activities, such as swimming, horseback riding or other activities that can be done individually or in groups. Some sports (like judo) are progressive and developmentally focused. Too often children with autism end up not enjoying outside activities or sports and the sedentary life style poses longer term risks for obesity and other health risks. For students who are interested in music, the Suzuki method can have considerable appeal for children with autism because it is progressive and developmentally organized, highly rule governed and tremendously respectful of children going at their own pace.
- Encourage open communication within the family. Helping siblings and supporting spouses in discussing the stress, strains and rewards of growing up in the family with a child who has autism is important.



**Joseph Levy, M.D., FAAP**

*A Professor of Pediatrics and Director of the Division of Pediatric Gastroenterology at New York University School of Medicine, Dr. Levy was Chief of Pediatric Gastroenterology at New York Hospital-Cornell, before setting up the Children's*

*Digestive Health Center and the Neurogastroenterology program at Columbia University.*

- A child on the spectrum is first and foremost a child. They are allowed to have the immaturities that all children have, and so are prone to get constipated, have food intolerance or acid reflux. There is no established universal validity to the claims that there is a specific intestinal disorder that afflicts children with autism. Autistic enterocolitis is not a medical entity.
- Diet restrictions aimed at improving behavior can create potential health hazards. One should always work with a knowledgeable nutritionist to ensure that no imbalances are created as a result of the foods selected. The popular gluten-free

and casein-free diets need to be undertaken with an open mind but at the same time, with a critical sense. These are not easy diets to follow and their benefits are far from being established. If parents do not see a difference after a few months of trying them, there is probably no need to persevere and continue the sacrifice.

• Disrupted sleep and self-injurious behaviors can be expressions of physical discomfort. Behavioral explanations for those manifestations should not be automatically ascribed the spectrum diagnosis. Your child could be acting up because he is experiencing headaches from sinusitis, cramps from consuming too many high-fiber foods, heartburn from acid reflux or burning on urination from a urinary infection, and there would be no way of determining the source unless the possibility is considered and a proper exam (and tests, if indicated) undertaken.

• Crankiness can be the result of disrupted sleep. Sleeping difficulties are quite common in children on the spectrum and can have a significant impact on their

quality of life. Some "night owls" could be experiencing obstructive apnea from enlarged tonsils and adenoids, and if their sleep is fitful, their day-time behaviors can be nightmarish. Sleep deprivation can impact on the ability to learn and might compromise the best educational program.

• Food allergies are much less prevalent than parents have been lead to believe. To ascribe certain behaviors, such as impulsivity, lack of concentration, or hyperactivity on food allergies based on blood tests (some of which have never even been validated as reflective of abnormal reactions to food antigens) is unfair to the child and to the family. It contributes to unnecessarily restricted diets and places the onus for controlling the complex behaviors of a child on the spectrum on the parents. Those behaviors are, by their very nature, a moving target, and rarely will a simple diet restriction resolve them. Parents can worry that they are contributing to their child outbursts by not being more compulsive and strict about their diet.

## Straight from the Experts



Bernice Polinsky

### Bernice Polinsky, BA, Parent Advocate

*Bernice has three children and three grandchildren. When he was 19, her 35-year-old son was diagnosed with high-functioning autism. He currently receives services from YAI. Bernice has been involved with family support, information and advocacy since her son's diagnosis in the early 1990s. Bernice was *Newsday's Everyday Hero* in 2003.*

- Educate yourself about autism spectrum disorders.
- Keep complete medical and school records in binders, including records on any other services your family member receives.
- Emphasize strengths and the positive whenever possible—both to your child and other people.
- Provide needed structure and safety.

- Seek out and know what supports and systems are available for your child and for you as a parent.
- Be realistic about your expectations for yourself and your child.
- Always advocate for your family member to be the best they can be.
- We know now that adults on the spectrum can continue to grow, learn and gain new skills. Never give up on your child.
- Plan for your child's future. It's never too early to start evaluating your options and making arrangements for your child's educational, financial and residential future. Get started before it's too late!
- Encourage your child's hobbies and strengths. These can help to facilitate relationships, education and even a future job or career.

## Making Family Rituals and Traditions Work for You!

By Dr. Richard Cohen, Chief of Mental Health Services at YAI/National Institute for People with Disabilities' Center for Specialty Therapy

For the last 10 years, Jann Tobias's family has celebrated New Year's Eve with a family dinner. With careful attention to detail, she uses her aunt's tablecloth and her grandmother's china, making a beautiful presentation of her family's favorite foods. Jann's husband, Bob, carves the roast beef with his father's knife. Over dinner, they tell stories about the relatives whose recipes comprise the meal. Dinner is followed by the year's home movies that her daughters had hurriedly helped their father splice together earlier that day. The night's festivities conclude with Jann's son, who has autism, conducting an appropriately embarrassing and humorous "Ode To The Last Year" sing-along that the family makes up.

Learning about Jann's family rituals, I was struck by how the celebration featured the best of each member of her family. When I shared this with Jann, she laughed but remarked that those crazy customs are the true glue of her family.

For families with a child on the autism spectrum, traditions and family rituals are frequently dropped because of the uncertainty of their child's behavior. Many families have told me that they would rather play it safe than risk the disruption.

However, developing and finessing family rituals can be a wonderful way to recognize transitions and milestones – the birth of a child, transition between schools, and other events – while providing a sense of security during times of change and uncertainty.

Through stability, familiarity, and repetition – techniques professionals use to engage children on the spectrum – these rituals become safe and predictable. Whether a graduation ceremony or the hushed recital of a funeral mass, rituals can ease celebratory or challenging transitions.

While rituals and family traditions can have significant positive impact on the health and well-being of families of children with autism and other developmental disabilities, the key is to adapt them to your family's needs and be flexible, without losing the meaning.

Families with children on the autism spectrum cherish the rituals that are passed down from their families and modify them in meaningful ways. And if their child is unable to participate – due to behavioral or health challenges – new rituals can be developed to fortify the family life.

Ask yourself, "What's important to how I define my family? What have I lost and how can I restore it? What's missing from his family traditions?"

Ivy and Craig's decision to have a bar mitzvah for their son Sam,

who is on the spectrum, was made with heartfelt conviction and equal uncertainty. The traditional Jewish ceremony marks the coming of age as a 13-year-old boy enters adulthood. After speaking to their Rabbi, the couple found a teacher willing to work with Sam and modify the service. Sam loves music, so they used song to help him learn his Torah passages.

Sam's parents had their doubts. How would their son, who has significant behavioral and language challenges, get through the ceremony? But Sam also loves parties, so Ivy kept reinforcing that there would be a big celebration with music afterward with family and friends. Ivy thought this encouraged Sam to practice with her.

Ivy and Craig prepared themselves for the possibility that Sam could wake up in a bad way on his special day, and not be able to go through with the ceremony.

Sam was surrounded by his family and a few close friends at his temple for his bar mitzvah. By limiting distractions, his family thought Sam would feel less pressure in case he was having a difficult day. Ivy was thrilled that Sam was able to chant his passages from the Torah. As the service concluded, the Rabbi asked Sam if he was proud of himself. Sam, who does not usually answer questions directly, responded with a gleeful, "Yes!" – a moment that no one in the family will ever forget.

This truly was a cause for celebration. A big party followed attended by family, many friends and members of the community. There was food, music, and dancing and Sam had a great time. Ivy, Craig and all of their guests were so proud of Sam. It was deeply moving for them, and they were delighted that they were able to share such an important family ritual with their community.

Jennifer's children would always go out to dinner the night before starting sleep away camp. "They always got to choose whatever they wanted for dinner," she recalled. "It was just how we did it."

That's what makes family rituals so important. They develop meaning over time. "It's a time for all of us to just be with each other during the chaos of preparing to leave for camp," Jennifer said. "It seems to lower our anxiety about leaving. We did this before and we are going to do this again, and we get to have a fun farewell even if we are anxious."

When these family activities are celebrated and looked forward to, they begin taking on special significance and become family lore. Once they take on meaning, that's when they become a cherished family ritual.



Richard Cohen, Ph.D.

## Social Skills Training for Children on the Autism Spectrum: Current Research and Options By Jed Baker, Ph.D.

### Types of Social Skills Training Approaches



Jed Baker, Ph.D.

While no single method of teaching social skills works for every child with autism, evidence shows that many different approaches can be effective. Today, there is a trend toward blending structured modeling and prompting strategies of behavioral approaches with aspects of the relationship-based approaches, which stress the importance of respecting the child's interests in order to build intrinsic motivation.

Some of the major approaches to skills training can be categorized into three types:

- Behavioral Approaches, such as Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), focus on altering observable events in the environment in order to increase positive behaviors and decrease undesirable behaviors. For example, an instructor might prompt a student to greet his peers and then reward the student for doing so.
- Cognitive Behavioral Approaches share some of these assumptions about altering the environment to change behavior, but they extend the notion to consider how a person interprets or perceives what happens in the environment. So a child's thoughts and perceptions become a primary focus in understanding how he or she will behave. For example, an instructor might explain to a student what others would think and feel if he did not greet his peers.
- Relationship-Based Approaches posit that developing a trusting relationship is a primary factor in influencing the development of new skills. By following the lead of the child and respecting his or her preferences, trust and motivation develop so that learning can occur.

### Key Components of Effective Social Skills Training

Based on the outcome research, there are certain critical components of skills training that must be considered in order to ensure that skills are taught effectively. I have outlined a flexible five-part model to address many of these issues (Baker, 2003; 2005).

#### 1. Assessment: Prioritize relevant skill goals based on input from the student, parents and teachers

Recent research suggests that we focus on specific, relevant skills that a student needs and work on them for a longer period of time. I typically ask that students, caring professionals and family help prioritize three to four skills to work on for months at a time across settings. This is a manageable number of goals if we are going to require parents and teachers to consistently prompt these skills to ensure generalization across settings.

To help articulate skill goals, I ask the student, teachers and parents to consider the following questions:

- What does the student do that might interfere with social interactions in specific settings? Examples might include violating others' space, interrupting others, talking at others about their interests, imposing their wishes on others, avoiding frustrating work or handling disagreements in aggressive ways.
- What does the student not do that might interfere with social interactions in specific settings? Examples might include not responding to peers or teachers, not asking for help when needed, not managing their hygiene or dressing appropriately and not initiating interaction with others.

#### 2. Motivation: Establish motivation to learn and use skills across settings

Just because we identify skill goals does not mean a student is motivated to learn those skills. The table is divided into strategies

that emphasize extrinsic motivation (i.e., rewards after skill use) and those that emphasize intrinsic motivation (i.e., making skill use itself rewarding). The table is also divided into those strategies useful for students who can communicate abstract concepts, such as how people think and feel, versus those whose communication is mostly limited to the concrete.

	Extrinsic Rewards	Intrinsic Rewards
Concrete language	Use of material rewards or social praise provided after skill enactment. The reward may have no natural connection to the skill in that the reward may not be available in naturally occurring settings.	<u>Pivotal Response Training</u> often imbeds the child's interests into the skill lesson, and intersperses challenging tasks in between easier ones to maintain intrinsic motivation. <u>Verbal Behavior Training</u> starts with "mand" training in which the child learns to request favored items or activities, so that the skill lesson and the reward are naturally connected. DIR@/Floortime™ and the Son Rise Program follow the lead of the child to gain motivation. <u>Relationship Development Intervention</u> –attempts to make social referencing fun and engaging in and of itself.
Abstract language	Extrinsic rewards are provided as above, yet often through the accumulation of symbolic rewards such as tokens or points on a behavior chart.	<u>Explain rationale</u> for working on challenging skills; that it will help the student reach his or her own goals. <u>For students who seem not to care</u> about their future, increase self-awareness of strengths and talents to establish future goals prior to focusing on their challenges. <u>Have students teach</u> necessary skills to others to help them feel competent themselves. <u>Make socializing fun</u> through high interest activities.

#### 3. Initial skill acquisition: Teach skills using strategies that match the student's language, cognitive and attention abilities.

There are two considerations in deciding how to teach skills to students.

- The type of strategy used depends on the symbolic language and cognitive skills of the students. Those with good abstract language skills can benefit from strategies in which skill steps are explained in addition to being modeled and prompted; whereas instructors must model and prompt the skill in the actual situation for students who have great deficits in abstract language.
- Where to teach the skills: in a group, classroom or individually. There is evidence that teaching in a classroom can increase generalization (Bellini et al., 2007). There are, however, benefits to smaller group instruction in which students have a chance to befriend each other.

#### 4. Generalization: Coach students to use skills in natural settings and capitalize on interests and preferences

In addition to establishing contrived or intrinsic motivation to