

Incidental Teaching: Setting up Learning Opportunities

Incidental teaching is a way to teach new skills. Although the word “incidental” might lead one to believe that it is something that is done without planning, this could not be further from the truth. Incidental teaching requires:

- 1. Knowing exactly what skills you are trying to teach.*
- 2. Knowing what activities or items your child likes.*
- 3. Setting up the activity so you have many opportunities to model the skill and your child has many opportunities to practice the skill.*

Here are two examples that help explain how you might use the technique of incidental teaching:

Andrea: Andrea is a primary student who is having difficulty with Math. The teacher and speech language pathologist know that Andrea has trouble understanding and using basic concept vocabulary. They are teaching the words: more, less, greater, first, second, then, last, before and after. One of Andrea’s favorite activities is baking with Mom and she loves making cookies. Andrea’s mother sets up a baking opportunity with Andrea every Saturday. Mom uses the words Andrea needs to learn, to describe what she is doing while she cooks (e.g. I have a cup of flour, but I need more. I think these cookies need less icing. First I have to grease the pan.) She asks Andrea questions that give Andrea a chance to use the new words (e.g. Do we need more pans or less? Should I add the flour before the butter or after?) She gives Andrea directions to ensure she understands the concepts (e.g. You need more milk. You didn’t add enough. We need less flour, please put some back.)

Doug: Doug is a special needs student in kindergarten. His language is quite weak for his age and he usually asks for things he wants using single words. The speech-language pathologist is teaching him to use 3 and 4 word sentences when he is talking with others. She is also teaching him to use the pronoun “I”. Doug loves building with Lego and likes to use Toy Story figures in his Lego play. Doug’s mother joins him in his Lego play a few times a week. She uses self-talk to model the kinds of sentences we want Doug to use e.g., “I want Buzz Lightyear please”. She sets up a situation in which Doug must take a turn after she takes a turn. She controls the toy items, placing

them on a high shelf so that he must ask her for them in order to get them. She is careful not to frustrate him, so when he points to the top shelf she gets up (so he knows she will get him what he wants) and asks, "What do you want?" If he responds with one word, she models the sentence she wants to hear and waits, with her hand on the toy. She reinforces his attempts to say more than one word or use the pronoun "I" by immediately giving him what he has asked for. As Doug comes to understand the expectation and is given many chances to get what he wants, he slowly expands his expressive language.

For more information about incidental teaching strategies that might help you practice your child's speech and language goals, don't hesitate to contact your speech-Language pathologist.

To read more about the research and effectiveness of this approach in children with special needs such as Autism, check out the following link:

<http://www.txautism.net/uploads/target/IncidentalTeaching.pdf>

References

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