



Errorless Learning

A Practical Guide for Parents and Educators

Children with autism share common characteristics in learning. For example, they adhere rigidly to routines and tend to over-generalize or repeat an answer or task. Because children with Autism memorize or repeat even incorrect answers or routines, it is important to initially teach without error.

Errorless Learning is a type of discrimination learning that eliminates the opportunity for incorrect choice selection, therefore maximizing the possibility of a correct response. As a skill or new task is taught, the instructor or parent should use hand over hand prompting to guide the student to the correct answer. The immediate prompt prevents any chance for incorrect responses. Unlike other teaching procedures where opportunities for initial mistakes are allowed and then corrected through prompting, errorless learning's immediate prompting ensures that a child may only respond correctly. Prompts are systematically faded until children are able to respond correctly on their own.

The theory behind errorless teaching is that children with autism do not learn as successfully from their mistakes as typical children may, but instead memorize and continue to repeat mistakes. Research suggests that frustration following incorrect responses associated with trial and error learning can actually provoke problem behavior such as tantrums and aggression. Using an initial prompt, before the child has an opportunity to respond incorrectly, avoids any chance of teaching a chain of errors and bypasses the discouragement that may come from incorrect responses.

Even with errorless teaching, errors may still occur. If a child makes an error, the teacher should present the same instruction again providing an immediate full prompt of the correct answer. It is important to correct and re-teach the lesson immediately, correcting errors after time has passed allows the mistake to become a routine and makes it harder to teach the correct response.

References:

Green, G. (1996). Behavioral intervention for autism. In C. Maurice, G. Green, & S. C. Luce (Eds.), Behavioral interventions for young children with autism (pp. 29-42). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Smith, T. (2001). Discrete trial training in the treatment of autism. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 16, 86-92

Touchette, P., & Howard, J. (1984). Errorless Learning: Reinforcement Contingencies and Stimulus Control Transfer in Delayed Prompting. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 17(2), 175-188.

Here's an Example Scenario:

Ms. Smith utilized errorless learning techniques in teaching Joey, a 3-year-old boy with autism, to recognize his body parts.

She asked Joey to touch the body part that she named. At first, Ms. Smith provided a full prompt by taking Joey's hand and touching the correct body part. After three trials, Ms. Smith faded the prompt by merely lifting Joey's hand toward the correct body part. Gradually, Ms. Smith faded prompts. After several trials, Joey could successfully perform the task with no guidance.