

Prioritizing During a Crisis: Small Changes that Make a BIG Difference

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During this time of uncertainty and with our learners home for extended periods of time, caregivers are certain to feel an overwhelming sense of pressure. Where do I start? How do I homeschool a learner with complex communication and learning needs? How can I stop all the challenging behaviors? First, congratulate yourself on your efforts to date. Next, take a step back and allow the time to focus on one small goal at a time. The following will provide practical examples using the base elements of the [Pyramid Approach to Education](#)[®].

1. Functional Activities: We all need to engage in meaningful activities! As the first step in the process, ask yourself, “What can I teach my child today that will make a big difference in the life of our family tomorrow?” For some learners, this could be working on independent toileting. For other children, this could be tolerating watching TV for a few minutes alone. For others, this could even include helping with meal prep for the family. It’s okay to focus on a single goal at a time! Find other examples of functional activities by age [here](#).

2. Reinforcement: So, what if your child doesn’t care about the goal you’ve selected? That’s okay! By identifying items/activities that the learner wants, we can then start the process of “making a deal”. For instance, you know that your child likes lots of different things. Rather than allowing the use of these things freely, consider saving a few special items that will only be available when working on your selected goal. That way, you can start your interaction by saying, “What would you like to earn – candy, stickers or a coloring book?” Once the learner makes a choice, signal the amount of work that needs to be completed. We refer to this as the, “reinforcer-first” strategy. Remember, start with a small amount of work needed to earn the selected item. Then, slowly expand the amount of time spent working on the goal prior to earning the special item (reinforcer). Note that these systems can and should become more complex over time. Many students will advance to using a token board, similar to the ones pictured [here](#). Learn more about Teaching Visual Reinforcement Systems© [here](#).

3. Communication: Everyone needs a calm way to get their wants and needs met! We sincerely hope that information regarding your child’s current communication system was sent from school. If possible, continue to encourage communication using that selected modality (PECS[®], Speech Generating Device/tablet with communication app, sign language, speech, etc.). Again, start small! Rather than handing over the cookie after dinner, capture an opportunity for your child to ask for the yummy dessert! If your learner doesn’t have a current means of communication, consider beginning implementation of the PECS Protocol. Don’t worry if you don’t have a way to make pictures! For now, you can simply make a drawing on a scrap piece of paper. Learn more details regarding how to get

started with PECS implementation [here](#). For an overview regarding the six Phases of the PECS Protocol, see our free webinar entitled, “*A Clear Picture: The Use and Benefits of PECS®*” available on our YouTube Channel, PECS Global, [here](#).

4. Contextually Inappropriate Behavior (CIBs) and Replacements: Usually, once our learners are engaged in meaningful activities AND we’ve identified and are using powerful reinforcers AND our students have an effective means of communication, we should see fewer challenging behaviors. That’s why it’s most important to focus on these first three pieces first. If challenging behaviors continue to occur, we start the process of investigating why the behavior is occurring. It’s only after we figure out the why (aka the “function”) that we can work on teaching a better way to achieve the same end result (aka the “replacement”). In other words, if your child is hitting his sibling because he wants to play with the iPad, the first thing we can teach is a better way to ask for the iPad. Of course, tolerating that the iPad isn’t always available is another important lesson! It’s helpful to have a whole team of professionals addressing these challenging behaviors. We know that’s not currently possible and we know that you are doing the very best for your child given the current circumstances!