

MOTOR IMITATION

GOAL

Learn the steps to teach your child to imitate the actions of those around him.

BACKGROUND

Motor imitation is the ability to watch what someone else does and then perform the same movements. It is one of the most important skills we can learn. Imitating others allows us to learn new skills quickly without specific teaching. We use imitation to problem solve when we are in new or unique situations.

While most children develop this naturally, many children with autism need specific teaching to pay attention to those around them. Teaching your child to imitate others allows him to become more independent. He learns to look for cues around him without waiting for someone to tell him what to do.

WHY MOTOR IMITATION IS IMPORTANT

Imagine you boarded a plane to a country across the planet from where you live. You have traveled for endless hours without stopping and they didn't provide food on the flight. You're hungrier than you have ever felt.

As you step off the plane and into the airport, you see people milling about, many of them eating. You want to ask them where and how they got the food, but you don't speak the language.

What do you do? How do you find the food? How do you learn how to get the food?


WHAT ACTIONS BENEFIT YOUR CHILD?

Consider what actions will help your child problem solve or be independent.


If you ended up at the airport with no idea how to get food, you would probably look at the people around you until you saw someone getting food. You would follow that person and do what she does. You might try to say the things she says or make the gestures she makes. In short, you would imitate her actions. Imitation allows you to learn new skills without specific teaching.

This is why it's so important for your child to learn to imitate others if he doesn't already do so. Many children with autism need specific teaching to learn to do this. Think about times when your child should naturally imitate others. When his brother waves hello to him, does he wave back? Does he participate in games like follow the leader and Simon says?

WHAT ACTIONS DOES YOUR CHILD PERFORM ON HIS OWN?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray border, intended for the user to write down the actions their child performs on their own.

WHAT ACTIONS WOULD HELP HIM BECOME MORE INDEPENDENT?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray border, intended for the user to write down the actions that would help their child become more independent.

TEACHING MOTOR IMITATION

This lesson will focus on teaching your child to pay attention to what you're doing and then do the same. As with all other skills, you begin teaching simple actions and gradually introduce actions that are more complex.

BASIC STEPS TO TEACH MOTOR IMITATION

Choose Targets

Make a list of the actions your child makes on his own and break down the more complex actions into simpler actions. These become your teaching targets.



Perform the Action

Perform the target action and say "do this" or "try this one" or "copy me." Do not say the word for the action, just perform the action yourself.



Prompt if Needed

If your child does not immediately imitate the action you make, physically help him perform the action. Gradually reduce the amount of help you provide to allow him to become more independent.



Provide Reinforcement

When your child performs the action correctly, immediately provide a tangible reinforcer along with praise. At first, give him reinforcement even if you help him, but gradually start to wait until he does it independently.

MAKE LEARNING FUN

MAKE IT PART OF YOUR CHILD'S DAY

Create opportunities for your child to imitate your actions during different parts of your daily routine.

No child wants to sit through endless drills when learning a new skill. Think about times during your daily routine where you can create quick teaching opportunities.

Consider times where there might be a few minutes of waiting or quiet time such as:

- Meal time
- Bath time
- Play
- Waiting for the bus
- Waiting for a video or game to load

You can also practice imitation when your child asks you for something or shows that he wants something. Rather than immediately giving him what he wants, ask him to perform a quick motor imitation.

Take just a minute or 2 during each opportunity to practice motor imitation.

Make sure to have something motivating with you that you can use to reinforce imitation.

BE FUN!

Don't be afraid to be silly!

Even though this skill is important, you don't need to pressure your child to perform. He will learn to imitate you more quickly if you make it a fun experience!

Be silly by making a funny face for him to imitate or try placing an object on your head and letting it fall to the floor.

Perform actions he wants to imitate or that are motivating on their own.

Pay attention to the targets he learns more quickly. This lets you know what he likes or what he finds easier. Remember each child is different!

Imitate his actions.

Many children enjoy when you imitate the actions they make. By doing this, you draw his attention to you. Attending to your actions is an important first step in getting him to imitate you.

Be light and fun when imitating your child's actions. Parenting is hard work, but enjoy this time with your child. This will help him enjoy it as well!



NEVER QUIT

Remember, each child grows and develops at his own rate. For many children, this process is slow and somewhat tedious. Don't give up!

If your child struggles with imitating your actions after you have gone through this process for several weeks or even a month, try different reinforcers. Often finding new foods, activities and toys your child is interested in sparks the motivation you need in your child.