USING TASK ANALYSIS TO TEACH SKILLS

GOAL

Understand how to use task analysis to break down complex tasks into simpler steps to teach your child new skills.

BACKGROUND

Many skills needed for independent living can be broken down into smaller, easier-to-teach skills or steps using a teaching strategy called task analysis. The best way to create a task analysis for any skill is to perform the skill and write down each of the steps you used to complete the task.

Task analysis is helpful for teaching many complex skills including:

- Cooking
- Vacuuming
- Getting dressed
- Feeding pets
- Laundry
- Brushing teeth
- Bathing
- Washing hands
- Doing dishes
- Taking out the garbage

The list includes nearly every skill needed to become an independent adult. Even if your child is very young, there are skills you can teach him using this teaching strategy.

SELF-CARE

Many autistic children struggle to learn important self-care or life skills. While many different teaching strategies are valuable for teaching these skills, the most valuable is called a task analysis. A task analysis is simply a step-by-step breakdown of a specific activity such as hand washing or brushing hair.

BREAK DOWN COMPLEX SKILLS

The best way to break any skill down is by simply doing the task and writing down each step you needed to do to complete the task. In addition to hand washing and brushing hair, this strategy is great for a long list of different skills including:

- bathing
- laundry
- getting dressed
- making a bed.

Breaking the skills down makes them easier to teach and easier for your child to learn.

WHAT OTHER SKILLS CAN YOU THINK OF?

TEACHING LIFE SKILLS

WASHING HANDS

Washing your hands is something you do without really thinking about it because you have performed the task so many times. Think about the steps required to wash your hands.

1. Walk to the sink
2. Turn on the water
3. Wet your hands
4. Get soap
5. Rub your hands together
6. Rinse your hands
7. Turn off the water
8. Dry your hands

There may be more or less steps depending on the type of faucet or soap or if you want to include rubbing the backs of the hands or between the fingers. This task that we all do without thinking about it consists of 8-10 or even more steps. The benefit of breaking the skill down and teaching it in this way is your child can learn to chain these skills together to become one fluid behavior just like you do.

BRUSHING HAIR

Let's try another skill, brushing hair. That seems like a skill with very few steps, right? What if I told you it could have up to 7 steps or more? Look at these possible steps:

1. Get hair brush
2. Brush left side of hair 10 times
3. Brush right side of hair 10 times
4. Brush back of hair 10 times
5. Brush bangs until they fall straight
6. Check mirror
7. Put brush away

Your child might need more or less steps depending on the length of hair and their overall abilities. No matter how many steps, the overall goal of teaching skills in this way is to link each step or behavior into a chain that eventually requires little thought or effort.

BEHAVIOR CHAINS

When you link each step from the task list together to form a single behavior, such as washing your hands, you can begin to preform the task with much less conscious thought.

Have you ever traveled somewhere that has very different sinks than those you're used to? When this happens, you pause to think about the steps and how to perform them. You might need to search for the mechanism that turns the water on or look around until you find the soap. The greater the difference the environment is to what you're used to, the more effort it takes for you to perform a task you could otherwise do with little thought. This happens because the chain of behaviors you use to wash your hands is now broken.

PROMPTING AND REINFORCEMENT

There are several strategies for providing prompting and reinforcement when teaching skills using this technique. One method is to start by teaching the first step of the skill and then teaching each of the subsequent steps in turn. This is called forward chaining. Another method is to start by teaching the last step of the skill and then teaching each previous step in turn. This is backward chaining. And the final strategy teaches all of the steps at the same time. This is total task chaining. This sounds complicated, but it's really not.

WHAT BEHAVIOR CHAINS DO YOU HAVE?

3 TYPES OF CHAINING

FORWARD CHAINING

Take a look at the hand washing example. If you use forward chaining to teach the skill, you will begin by teaching your child to walk to the sink and helping her perform each of the rest of the skills. When your child walks to the sink on her own, you will begin to teach her to turn the water on while helping her complete all the remaining steps. You will continue to teach the next step in order once your child learns to do the current step independently.

BACKWARD CHAINING

If you use backward chaining, you will begin by helping her complete all the steps until the last one and focus on teaching her to dry her hands. Once she's able to dry her hands on her own, you continue to help her with the beginning steps and teach her to turn off the water then allow her to dry her hands on her own. As she becomes independent with a step, you will begin to teach her the step that comes just before the step she just learned.

TOTAL TASK CHAINING

When using total task chaining you teach her to complete all of the steps as you go along. Although this is a more familiar form of teaching, it might be difficult for some autistic children.

WHICH IS BEST?

There isn't one strategy that is right for all children and there isn't one right way to teach your child. Find a teaching strategy that is comfortable for you and effective for you child. This might involve trying each one on a different skill. What's really important to this process is breaking that skill down into teachable parts and gradually encouraging independence with different parts as your child learns those skills.

HOW WILL YOU USE TASK ANALYSIS?

LIST THE SKILLS YOU MIGHT TEACH USING TASK ANALYSIS:

WHICH TYPE(S) OF CHAINING WILL YOU USE?