

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Program

Reciprocal imitation training (RIT) is a naturalistic intervention designed to teach young children with ASD to imitate spontaneously during on-going play interactions with a play partner. The goal of this intervention is to teach your child to imitate your behavior, as a means of social interaction. Therefore, it is more important that your child attempt to copy your actions than it is for him or her to perform any specific action correctly. The techniques involved in RIT can be used during a variety of play activities (e.g., play with toys, play at the park), as well as during daily routines (e.g., bath time). As part of this training program, you will learn to use several different strategies to teach your child spontaneous imitation skills.

Structuring the Environment

There are several important steps to follow when structuring the environment to ensure successful interactions with your child.

Create a Defined Space: The closer you are to your child, the more likely he or she is to engage with you. However, some children have difficulty staying close to others, and will leave the space as soon as a parent tries to join him or her. It is helpful to limit space by using physical or visual boundaries; you can play in a small room or rearrange furniture to block off a section of a larger room.

Limit Distractions: Children can be easily distracted by things that compete for their attention, so be sure to turn off the TV and computer, and limit the amount of clutter or “stuff” that is in the room. When you are first learning the techniques, it is helpful to limit the presence of other people. You may also want to limit the number of toys that are available to your child at a given time. When too many toys are available, a child may change from one toy to another without engaging for any length of time.

Rotate Toys: You may have noticed that your child seems to become bored with toys fairly easily, especially those that he sees frequently. Therefore, it can be helpful to separate your child’s toys into several sets with around 5 toys, or pairs of toys, in each. If you choose to do this, you can rotate the sets of toys as necessary. This will keep toys fresh and exciting, and can increase the novelty of your child’s toys without having to continually buy new ones.

Selecting Materials

Although RIT can be implemented during a variety of activities that don’t use toys, like the bath, or outside, toys are an important part of teaching imitation skills. It is helpful to choose toys that come in sets of two, or toys that have many pieces so you can imitate your child’s play without taking away his or her toy of interest.

It is also important to pick toys that your child enjoys playing with. Toys that can be used in multiple ways like balls, cups and slinkys are better than toys that only have one or two functions like mechanical toys. Although you want to pick toys that are interesting, avoid selecting toys that are overly absorbing. You may find it helpful to keep 4 to 6 sets of toys out while practicing reciprocal imitation training. This will help to limit distractions while keeping the play exciting and new.

You shouldn't feel like you have to go out and buy new toys in order to learn and practice RIT. However, there are certain toys that can be especially good for teaching imitation. These include stacking cups and stacking rings, blocks, koosh balls, squishy tubes, balls, slinkys, tub toys, coloring or painting materials, sensory toys, cars, trains, weebles or little people, animal figures, pretend food, musical toys, playdoh.

Plan for Success

Plan to Practice: It is important to remember that learning any thing new takes practice. Because practice is so important, we suggest that you schedule time, each day, to work on using these intervention techniques with your child. If possible, select a 20-minute period each day during which you are able to set aside time to play and interact with your child. If 20 minutes is initially too much for you or your child, you can break this time into smaller 10 or 5 minute chunks. By setting aside to practice, you will give yourself the best chance to become an effective teacher for your child.

Complete All Training Components: In order to get the most from this program, it is important that you take the time to complete all components of the training. This includes watching each lesson, completing the corresponding activities, and completing the homework assignments.

Prepare Yourself for Success: Remember, learning takes time and commitment. Make sure that you have enough time and support in order to fully commit yourself to learning and using this intervention. It is important that you be patient with yourself and your child. There may be times during this program when you feel overwhelmed or frustrated. Don't be too hard on yourself—we all feel this way! What is important is that you take time to recognize and reward your child's, as well as your own, achievements and accomplishments.