

Teaching Object Imitation

To teach imitation, you will go back and forth between imitating your child and providing opportunities for your child to imitate you. The goal is to get into a back and forth “social game” where you and your child take turns imitating each other. Of course, when you first use this intervention, you will be doing most of the imitating; your child will only be expected to imitate you once every one to two minutes. In order to help your child learn to imitate, you will use physical guidance and praise. The following strategies will make teaching imitation most effective.

Model Actions with Similar Toys: In order to increase your child’s ability to pay attention to your actions and motivation to imitate, you should model an action with a toy that is similar to the one that your child is already playing with. Every minute (on average), model an action with the duplicate of the toy your child is engaged with. Make sure that your child is attending to you (making eye contact or watching your actions) when you model actions. Imitating your child should help increase attention, but you may also call your child’s name, or block his or her play to get his or her attention if necessary. Also, it is important that your child knows this is something he or she should imitate, so make sure the action is “big” so that your child notices it. If your child is not engaged with a toy, try to get him or her interested in a toy or model an action with the last toy your child was playing with.

Use a Verbal Label: When you model an action, you want your child to pay attention and imitate. However, you want your child to learn to imitate you spontaneously, rather than on command. Therefore, rather than telling your child to imitate (e.g., “Do this.”) or telling your child what to do (e.g., “Give the baby a drink”), you can use a “verbal label” to describe what you are doing. This way your child will learn to imitate when you model an action and talk about it, rather than only when you tell him or her to do so. Verbal labels should be short, at or slightly above your child’s language level. For example, if you model rolling a ball, make sure your child is watching you, roll the ball with an exaggerated gesture, and say “Roll”. If your child has a difficult time paying attention to what you are doing, you can say his or her name to get his attention first; but try to avoid doing this every time or your child will learn to imitate only when you say his or her name.

Model Good Actions: You want to begin by modeling actions that your child is naturally inclined to want to imitate. This includes actions that your child already performs on his or her own (familiar actions), as well as actions that are at or slightly above your child’s developmental level. If you model actions that are too advanced, your child is less likely to understand the action and imitate. To decide good actions to model, watch what your child does with toys on his or her own and model similar actions. If your child likes to explore toys by banging, throwing, and dropping them, model these types of actions as well as nesting one object in another, putting objects in containers, lining, stacking, or ordering toys in certain ways. If your child uses most common toys appropriately, such as pushing cars, putting people in cars, and throwing and catching balls, model these types of actions as well as some basic pretend actions. The actions you model do not have to be functional or meaningful; the goal is to increase your child’s motivation to imitate your behavior.

Model and then Follow Through: You may need to give your child several opportunities to imitate the action spontaneously. Model the action with a verbal label and wait 10 seconds for your child to imitate. If he or she does not imitate spontaneously after 10 seconds, model the same action again with the same verbal label. Do this *up to three times*. If your child does not imitate after the third model, you may tell your child “You do it” if he or she responds to verbal instructions; otherwise physically guide your child to imitate you.

Praise Imitation: As soon as your child imitates you, provide him or her with verbal praise and physical affection if your child enjoys this. Praise should be more intense if your child imitates you spontaneously than if you need to physically guide your child to imitate. It is more important for your child to match your actions in general, than to perform a specific action exactly, so be sure to praise any attempt at imitation even if it is not perfect. After your child has imitated your action or gesture, return to imitating and describing your child’s play.

It can be challenging to use all of the techniques together during interactions with you child. It can also be hard to find a good balance between imitating your child’s behavior and providing opportunities for your child to imitate you. One of the best things you can do is practice, practice, practice! Try using the RIT techniques across different activities and during different times of day to find your and your child’s comfort zone.

We also have a rubric you can use to track your use of the RIT intervention techniques. Try to complete the rubric on yourself after an RIT practice session. This can be another great way to help you learn and become comfortable with the intervention strategies!

RIT COMPONENT	1	2	3	4	5
CONTINGENT IMITATION Imitate child's appropriate toy play, gestures, and vocalizations. (Does not need to be playing with exact same toy)	You do not imitate your child's gestures, vocalizations, and toy play	You imitate a few of your child's gestures, vocalizations, and toy play, but miss the majority of opportunities	You imitate your child's gestures, vocalizations, and toy play about 50% of the time, but miss many opportunities	You imitate more than 50% of your child's gestures, vocalizations, and toy play when your child is appropriately engaged, but miss opportunities	You imitate almost all of your child's gestures, vocalizations, and toy play throughout the session when your child is appropriately engaged.
LINGUISTIC MAPPING Use simplified, repetitive language around child's focus of attention.	You do not use simplified language around your child's focus of attention, your language is too complex, or you do not use any language.	You use simplified language around your child's focus of attention during some of the session, but miss the majority of opportunities or majority of your language is too complex.	You use simplified language around your child's focus of attention up to 50% of the time, but miss many opportunities or much of your language is too complex.	You use simplified language around your child's focus of attention for more than 50% of the interaction, but miss opportunities or some of your language is not appropriate for your child's level of language.	You use simplified language around your child's focus of attention throughout the interaction. Most of your language is appropriate to your child's language level.
MODEL Model actions around child's focus of interest.	You model actions that are inappropriate for your child's level/interest or do not recruit your child's attention.	You model some actions that are appropriate for your child's level/interest but also many that are not or often fail to recruit your child's attention.	You model some actions that are appropriate for your child's level/interest and recruit your child's attention some of the time.	You model actions that are appropriate for your child's level/interest more than 50% of the time and recruit your child's attention the majority of the time.	You model actions that are very appropriate for your child's level/interest and recruit your child's attention.
PACING Model an action every 1 to 2 minutes on average. Adjust rate when necessary to keep your child engaged.	You do not model any actions for imitation or the pacing of your models significantly disrupts your child's engagement or learning.	You model actions at a significantly lower or higher rate throughout the interaction (1-2 or 13-15 models in 10 min). Pacing somewhat disrupts child's engagement or learning.	You model actions at a somewhat lower or higher rate throughout the interaction (3 or 12 models in 10 min). Pacing does not significantly disrupt child's engagement or learning.	You model actions at an appropriate rate for some, but not all of the interaction (4 or 11 models in 10 min). Pacing does not significantly disrupt child's engagement or learning.	You model actions at an appropriate rate throughout the interaction (5-10 models in 10 min). Pacing is appropriate for keeping child engaged and learning.
PROMPT Physically prompt child to imitate after 3 presentations of action.	You do not physically prompt your child to imitate action after presenting the action 3 times. Or, you physically prompt your child to imitate all actions before 3 models.	You prompt your child to complete the action after third trial a minority of the time. Prompting often does not result in imitation (e.g., child switches activities without imitating), or you often physically prompt before 3 rd model.	You prompt your child to complete the action after third trial up to 50% of the time, but miss many opportunities, prompting does not result in imitation (e.g., child switches activities without imitating), or you physically prompt before 3 rd model.	You prompt your child to complete the action after third trial the majority of the time, but miss opportunities or prompting occasionally does not result in imitation (e.g., child switches activities without imitating), or you physically prompt before the 3 rd model.	You consistently prompt your child to complete the action after third trial if he/she has not spontaneously imitated. Once you begin a trial, you follow through so that the trial ends in imitation.
PRaise Animatedly praise child's spontaneous or prompted imitation.	You do not praise your child's spontaneous or prompted imitation or consistently praise incorrect responses.	You praise a minority of your child's spontaneous and prompted imitations, but miss the majority of opportunities or praise multiple responses.	You praise some of your child's spontaneous and prompted imitation, but miss many opportunities or praise incorrect responses.	You praise the majority of your child's spontaneous and prompted imitation, but miss some opportunities or praise some incorrect responses.	You praise all of your child's spontaneous and prompted imitation throughout the interaction. Praise is withheld for incorrect responding.