

A large, light gray sunburst graphic with a semi-circle at the bottom and several rays extending upwards, serving as a background for the title.

## Hot Tips for IY Autism Programs Tailoring Role Play Practices to Children's Developmental Level

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The Incredible Years learning methods and processes are based heavily on a collaborative process facilitated by the IY group leader with the parent and teacher participants involving discussion of video vignettes, pulling out behavioral principles and tailoring them to the target child's developmental goals. During this discussion group leaders set up role plays to practice the specific behavior management skills pertinent for the session topic. These role plays are set up in a learning sequence going from simple practice to more individualized practices based on one or two of the target children's language, social and emotional development. This document is designed to help group leaders tailor practices according to the needs of the group. Every video vignette does not need to have 3 different practice levels. Rather, the group leader will make sure that by the end of each group session, or workshop that the participants have learned the tailoring principles that are relevant for their target child.

**Step 1: Set up the first role play practice similar to video vignette scenario.** After a video vignette has been viewed and discussed then the IY group leader will set up a practice that would include similar activities and be related to the key principles and scripts pulled out of the discussion of the vignette. These key points will have been summarized on the flip chart and positioned so the teacher or parent in the role play practice can see them.

**Step 2: Clarify the goal of each of the practices clearly.** Depending on the topic you are working on, such as promoting language development, or, social behaviors, or, emotional literacy, or self-regulation, the group leader will set up a clear goal for the practice of the specific skill related to the child's goal. For example, goals for practicing *language promotion* could include one or two of the following elements: the pacing of language, number of words, intentional prompting, partial prompting, getting in the child's spotlight, and use of gestures and visual prompts. The goals for practicing a specific *social skill* could include one of the following: prompting a child to ask for something they want, or sharing, or helping another, or taking turns, or encouraging joint play. The goals for promoting *emotional literacy and self-regulation* could include: helping the child to recognize emotion language in self, or recognize the emotions of others, practicing using self-regulation skills such as breathing or positive self-talk or positive imagery, or using puppets to calm down, or learning about using the calming thermometer. The strategies of teacher or parent modeling and prompting these skills will depend on the child's language and their social and emotional developmental level.

**Step 3: Identify the child's developmental status for the role play practice.** Check out the "*How I am incredible!*" profile for information including the details of a child's language and play level (parallel play, atypical play, functional play, or imaginary play). Start simple by building on the

scenario developed from the vignette shown and discussed and use the *How I am Incredible* profile for Hudson or Amelia depending on which child was in the vignette discussed. (see their sample profiles on web site [www.incredibleyears.com/resources/gl/parent-program/](http://www.incredibleyears.com/resources/gl/parent-program/)). Start by identifying the behavior goal that is being prompted and the motivating antecedent (child's goals) and rewarding consequence (ABC). Identify the script for the teacher or parent role play based on Hudson or Amelia's target goal and child's developmental status.

**Step 4: Ready-Set-Action.** Action starts with players knowing their parts. Pause during role play practice as needed for reinforcement to person in role as parent or teacher, or to provide additional ideas, in the same way you would pause a video vignette. Replay to try out an alternative good idea. Afterwards debrief by asking group to list the effective strategies used by the parent or teacher and ask for insights gained from observing the child and adult in the practice. Explore alternative strategies and how this might look different for a child with different developmental level (e.g., less language). Sometimes these ideas might be tried out in another practice.

**Step 5: Replay the scenario using one of the target child profiles.** Use the child profile that has been developed by the teacher or parent in the first session to set up the next practice. For example, select a child with one word sentences and explore the principles that pertain to such a child such as: the "one up rule", pacing more slowly and using limited number of targeted words, positioning with child, strategies for staying in child's spotlight, pausing and waiting for a child's response, and importance of repetition and imitation. Decide whether the practice should be one-on-one (adult-child) with teacher or parent modeling the skill and when it might be appropriate to bring in a 2<sup>nd</sup> child, or a puppet, or character to model a skill. Decide whether the person in role as child would benefit from playing the part of their own child to gain the child's perspective and first see how another person would respond. When this happens, try to give the person a chance to then take the role of parent or teacher to try out any new approaches.

Role plays should be set up to cover different parent and teacher coaching strategies including: modeling, prompts and partial prompts, intentional communication and specific coaching language. Group leaders should make clear that parents or teachers only move to the next language or social or emotional strategy when children are successful with the earlier strategy.

**Step 6: Another role play is set up with another target child from the profiles.** The subsequent role play can be set up with a nonverbal child selected from another one of the participant's child profiles. Start by identifying the precise behavioral goal for that child and what the motivating antecedent will be. For example, is the goal to have the child point, use a sign or gesture, or attempt to speak? Is eye contact necessary. Ensure that the request behavior is developmentally appropriate and determine whether the child has already been taught pointing or hand gestures before the practice.

Set up the role play with the teacher or parent using more gestures and simplifying and reducing number of words even further with this child. If the child makes any sounds that are not understood, repeat and imitate their sounds with understanding to encourage any sort of verbal

interaction. These early sounds are the beginning of a child realizing he can use them to let another know what he wants. When teaching a child gestures, sometimes the teacher or parent may need to physically move the child's hand into the palm up position (hand over hand), or to mold the child's finger to point towards the object wanted. Determine how much teaching the child has had in regard to using visual prompts before doing a role play because this will help you know if you first need to practice this teaching first in the role play before using the visual prompt in an interaction.

**Step 7: Small Group Paired Practices:** After doing several of these role plays in the large group, pair up participants to practice with others who have children that are developmentally similar in terms of language and play ability. Have teachers or parents play the role of their own child or student so they can experience the viewpoint of their child when an adult uses the coaching language and gestures or visual prompts. Allow plenty of time for this practice and go around the room to watch what they are doing to assist as needed. After each pair has practiced, bring them back to debrief and share their learning.

**Brainstorm other ways to learn and practice the targeted skill:** Do a buzz and ask the parents or teachers about other opportunities for setting up practices to learn the particular skill such as the asking behavior described above. This can include asking for other favorite toys, or activities, or foods, or a story book, or to remove something. Help parents and teachers realize all the opportunities they have to teach this skill during the day.

**Sequence Role Plays:** I suggest starting role plays with a child with more language such as Hudson or Amelia as your first role play as this will likely be the easiest one for parents or teachers as they are essentially replaying what they have seen on the vignette. Then for the next role play pick a child from the profiles who has one word only sentences but is interested in other children and finally a role play with a child with no words and seemingly little interest in peers or adults. At each role play you add different communication principles such as reducing number of words, adding gestures or a visual prompt. You may even bring in a puppet who models the targeted behavior you want the child to learn such as pointing, or using words. When using puppets or toy characters, it is important that the puppets' language, gestures, or visuals match those that you have identified as appropriate for the child's developmental level. For example, if the parent/teacher would use one word and a gesture in an interaction with the child, the puppet should also use one word and a gesture.

**General Comments:** It is important for teacher or parent participants to see the value of keeping the child learning simple with small steps, and to understand when it could be valuable to incorporate gestures, or visual aids, or songs to help the nonverbal child indicate her request or as a means of getting in the child's spotlight first before learning can occur. Learning to point in itself is a challenge for children with ASD and it will need repeated practice when the nonverbal child really wants something. Note that it is not necessary for the child to have eye contact when asking or pointing. Eye contact is a separate skill that can be learned after children have learned the value of pointing or using another nonverbal gesture.

**Pace complexity of your role plays throughout sessions:** You do not need to have 3 levels of practice for every vignette. You may use one vignette to pull out a few basic principles in a practice. Then explore other ideas for one target child and practice this. Just as group leaders help teachers and parents to pace their approach according to the target child's development so will the pacing of the teachers and parents learning gradually be added to in subsequent discussions and sessions.

### **Sample Scenarios for Practicing the Social Skill of Asking**

Here is an example of using these steps for teaching one social skill that is, *asking for something*.

## **Role Play Scenarios for Social Coaching: Learning to ask for something wanted**

### **Child with Language**

These vignettes in the Parent and Teacher Autism Programs could be shown first to talk about how to help children learn how to ask for something they want using the ABC sequence.

- Teacher Autism Program Part 1 Vignette 7 & 8: Asking for Help Amelia; Vignette 10: Asking Hudson; Part 2 Vignette 9
- Parent Autism Program Part 1 Vignette 7 Hudson with balloons; Vignette 8 Kilani
- Part 3: Vignette 12 Amelia; Vignette 18 Hudson

### **Step 1: Set up the role play practice similar to video vignette scenario**

See vignettes above for expanding discussion of the principles for prompting and teaching children how to ask for help. In these vignettes you will view examples of parent or teacher modeling, how they use the antecedent (A) to motivate the child to use the asking behavior or words (B) and how the child will be reinforced (C).

**Scenario: Child with language (selected from Amelia's profile document after the vignette of her has been discussed)**

### **Step 2: Clarify the goal of each of the practices clearly**

The goal for this first role play after seeing one of the Amelia vignettes is to help Amelia know how to use appropriate language to ask for what she wants from adults or other children.

### **Step 3: Identify the child's developmental status**

The child, Amelia, on the vignette reviewed has good language when alone with her mother but when with peers or teachers she withdraws and seems anxious. She avoids asking for what she wants or letting someone know she needs help. The goal is for her to say, "I want the balloon" or "help with... please". She has these words but doesn't use them in group situations with peers or teachers.

### **Step 4: Ready-Set-Action Scenario for Practicing with Anxious Child who does have Language**

The teacher or parent selected for the role play has chosen an activity such as play dough, or balloon, or bubbles that she knows Amelia loves to play with and will motivate her (Antecedent).

The parent or teacher will use the ideas generated from the discussion of the Amelia vignette as a script for the ABC practice. The group leader has told the adult in role as the child not to misbehave but to be reluctant to speak. The teacher or parent holds up the desired object (motivating antecedent) and prompts the child in various ways by first modeling the asking behavior and by rehearsing what the child can say, “please I want the blue playdough... “. When the child (Amelia) repeats any of these words, she is given some of the desired object right away such as a bit of the play dough, or blowing one bubble. She is praised for her friendly asking behavior with enthusiasm, “that was such a friendly way for asking for that, thank you for looking at me” and given another chance to ask again for more play dough.

Once Amelia has learned and frequently practiced the asking words in one-on-one interactions with an adult, then the role play can proceed with a 2<sup>nd</sup> child who has been chosen because she is socially competent and will easily share play dough. This could be an older sibling or a socially adept child in the classroom. This time the 2<sup>nd</sup> child is given the play dough and the teacher or parent prompts Amelia to ask for some of this child’s play dough. Despite all the previous practice experiences with the teacher or parent it still might be necessary to whisper and remind Amelia of what to say or to use a partial prompt. When Amelia has successfully asked and has received the play dough from her friend, the adult says, “wow you asked so nicely and your friend shared. You are good friends.” The consequence is her getting what she wanted plus the adult’s positive attention and labelled praise. Framing Amelia as friendly will help her with her anxiety about peer relationships.

***Note**, in most parent/teacher groups, this second step of adding a peer could be done in a practice in a subsequent group workshop. Parents and teachers need to master and practice on level of individual adult-child coaching before moving onto incorporating another child. Moreover, adding a 2<sup>nd</sup> child to the child’s practice can be distracting and anxiety producing for the child if done too soon. Likewise adding too much complexity to the role play practices for the teachers or parents before they have mastered the basics of tailoring with one child can be confusing with too many piled on skills at one time. Just as it is important to pace learning to child’s developmental level it is also important to pace learning for parents and teachers. Each session or workshop will build on prior learning and experiences and participants goals for themselves.*

#### **Step 5: Ready-Set-Action Scenario for Practicing with Target Child who has Less Language**

Using the profile that was developed for another child from the group, the scenario is replayed with a child with one word sentences. The goal is for her to use at least two words and to combine the words with a gesture. The parent or teacher task is to use the “one up rule” adding a second word and learning a request gesture to see how this will expand her frequency of asking for what she wants. The reason for learning the request gesture is to give the child easier methods of asking someone for something. First, the adult gives the child a bit of yellow play dough and puts out her hand palm side up and asks, “Play dough please” or, uses a puppet to model asking for some playdough. When the child gives the parent or teacher some play dough she is praised and immediately given the play dough back. After this asking has been frequently modeled in social interactions, the parent or teacher holds up some of the target child’s favorite blue playdough to prompt the child to ask for some of that color using ask words, or gesture of hand held out with

palm turned up. If the child doesn't say anything, the adult tells her what she can say. "You can say, 'blue play dough please.'" If the child imitates those words, the adult gives her a bit of the play dough right away and enthusiastically praises her by saying, "So friendly to say blue play dough please." Then the adult shows the child that she has more blue playdough, and prompts the child to say the words on her own. If she doesn't do that she tries a partial prompt with the hand gesture, "please blue...." encouraging her to fill in the blank word play dough with the rest of the verbal requests. This practice prompting the child to ask with two or three words and to use the hand gesture is repeated many times in play exchanges. The child is rewarded with the play dough for using the gesture, or using just one word or even making an attempt at a verbal response in the beginning in order to reward steps in the right direction. With ongoing support, modeling and prompting the child will eventually develop confidence to use more words or gestures because she is always rewarded when she does this.

*In subsequent groups, additional practices would be set up to coach a child for asking something from a peer.* Once the child has learned how to ask verbally by using two words accompanied by a gesture, then a role play could be set up with the target child and a socially adept peer. This would only be done when the target child is ready for this and has indicated some interest in other children. This time the 2<sup>nd</sup> child has the play dough, and parent or teacher prompts the target child by saying, "you want play dough, so you can say \_\_\_\_". The teacher or parent pauses to see if the child will say, "please play dough." The plan is to see if child can do this on her own with a peer, but if not then the parent or teacher proceeds by putting out her hand and modeling part of the request to see if she will fill one word or copy the gesture. If not, the parent or teacher models the whole request with the gesture and lets the child imitate the words. Whenever the child makes an effort to ask the 2<sup>nd</sup> child for the play dough, the 2<sup>nd</sup> child is encouraged and prompted to share it right away and is praised for this sharing. Eventually the target child will learn that asking with friendly words or gestures results in her getting what she wants. The key idea here is to start with teacher or parent modeling and prompting the words or gestures to use when asking in adult-child interactions so the child has learned this skill. Next step is to add in a 2<sup>nd</sup> child to prompt the child's experience learning how to do this with a peer.

### **Step 6: Ready-Set-Action Scenario for Practicing with Target Child who is Nonverbal**

As before, identify the precise asking behavior desired for this child. Decide whether eye contact is important, what hand gesture will be used, or whether words or sounds are an intervention target? Help the parent/teachers identify a developmentally appropriate goal based on what the child is currently doing. Set up the role play with the adult using more gestures and simplifying words even further. For example, if the child makes any sounds that are not understood, the parent or teacher is encouraged to repeat or imitate them with the goal of encouraging any verbal sounds in the interaction. It doesn't matter if the sounds don't make sense. This use of gestures and imitating sounds by the adult can be practiced and debriefed for key ideas learned.

Following this, the parent or teacher might replay the scenario bringing in the use of a visual picture or symbol that reflects asking, such as picture of a hand held out, or a pointing finger. For example, if the child holds out hand palm up for the request, or points to the ask picture, the adult can point to the visual request picture with enthusiasm and give the child the play dough.

*“Yes! You are pointing to play dough!”* Each time the child wants more play dough, there must be lots of repetitions of both the word, the gesture, and picture of asking symbol. The adult is also modeling and prompting the actions she wants. Sometimes the teacher or parent may need to physically hold out the child’s hand palm up or mold child’s finger into a point and bring the child’s finger to the play dough to help the child understand what it means to use this signal or gesture to get something they want.

By breaking down these skills according to the child’s receptive and expressive language development, the group parents or teachers will be ready to work in pairs to practice these skills according to their target child’s developmental status.

The steps described above for setting up role plays to teach children to ask for something can be used for any of the content areas such practices for teaching social skills such as sharing, taking turns, waiting, and helping or, for emotion language, or self-regulation methods such as deep breathing or self-talk. The skills are practiced in a layered and sequenced way depending on the goals for the child.

For example, for emotion literacy teaching with the child chosen from the target profiles the first thing to know is how many emotion words that child has if any? Based on this awareness of what emotion words the child is already using, then identify the target emotion words. Next practices would be set up accordingly with “one up rule” for a child with some emotion words to perhaps help him develop awareness of more positive feelings such as feeling calm, or loved or courageous. For less verbal children, it may be expanding their emotion understanding of themselves or others with visual pictures of emotions and use of puppets who model and share their own emotions. For nonverbal children practices would include reducing the number of words, slowing down the pace, allowing for lots of repetition and imitations, and using emotion visuals prompts to help them understand words for their own emotions. This would be done before working on their awareness of other’s emotions.

***“When setting up these practices, group leader flexibility is needed for helping participants learn how to tailor to their target child’s goals. Try not to pack in too much in one practice and build on practices with discussions following different vignettes and in different sessions.”***