How Do You Know When a Child Is Ready to Learn Something New?

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D

Why good teaching requires knowing when to practice, when to move forward, and when to challenge a child.

One of the questions I want therapists and teachers to ask themselves regularly is whether the child they are working with is ready to learn something new. Sometimes we become so focused on following a treatment plan or completing a data sheet that we forget to consider whether the child has already learned what we are teaching. When that happens, we may spend valuable instructional time practicing skills that no longer require intensive teaching.

I was recently talking with a therapist who explained that she sometimes uses extra time during the day to work on skills beyond the child's current targets. She had noticed that the student was performing some of the existing skills very well, and she wanted to see whether the child was ready for something more challenging. I told her that I thought she was thinking about the situation exactly the right way.

That is what good teachers do. They pay attention to what children know, recognize when they are ready for something new, and look for opportunities to help them move forward.

Do Not Spend All Day Teaching Something the Child Already Knows

Let's imagine that we are teaching a child to identify common objects. I hold up a phone and ask, "What's this?" The child immediately says, "Phone."

Then I hold up a water bottle. "What's this?" The child says, "Water bottle."

If these are well-established skills and the child consistently demonstrates them independently, I probably do not need to spend the rest of the day asking the same questions. The child knows what those objects are, and repeating the same activity over and over may not be the best use of our time.

Of course, we still need to maintain previously learned skills. Maintenance does not necessarily require the same amount of instructional time as teaching a new skill. Once a skill is established, we can often practice it naturally while spending more time on things the child is still learning.

This is not an argument for rushing through instruction or moving on because a child answered correctly once. It is an invitation to look at the child's performance carefully. If a child is responding accurately, independently, and consistently, we should ask whether the current target still needs the same level of attention.

Look for Signs That the Child Is Ready

One of the clearest signs that a child may be ready for a new target is consistent, independent performance on the current one. If the child is responding accurately across multiple opportunities and sessions, we should consider whether it is time to increase the difficulty.

We also want to know whether the child can demonstrate the skill with different people, materials, and arrangements. A child may perform a skill reliably in one teaching situation but need more practice when the conditions change. Looking at those differences helps us decide whether the skill is ready for maintenance, generalization, or a new level of difficulty.

For example, suppose we are teaching a child to identify the number two. We might begin by presenting the number in isolation. Then we might teach the child to identify it from a field of two numbers. Once the child can consistently select the number two when it is presented alongside one distractor, we may increase the difficulty by presenting it in a field of three.

That progression allows us to build on what the child has already learned. We are not introducing harder tasks at random. We are using the child's performance to determine what comes next.

A new target does not always need to be more difficult in only one way. We might change the number of choices, introduce new examples, vary the materials, change the setting, or ask the child to use the skill in a more functional activity. The right next step depends on what the child knows and what they need to do with the skill in daily life.

Sometimes the Child Shows You They Are Ready Before the Data Do

This is where clinical judgment becomes important. Sometimes a therapist notices that a child is performing a skill easily, even though the formal data have not yet met the established mastery criterion. The therapist may have a strong sense that the child is ready for the next step.

That observation is valuable, but it does not mean we should ignore the mastery criteria. Instead, we can collect additional information, conduct an appropriate probe, or discuss the observation with the supervising behavior analyst. The goal is to determine whether the child really is ready rather than simply assuming they are.

I want therapists to tell me when they notice these things. A quick message saying, “I think she’s ready to move on from this,” can be extremely helpful. It gives us an opportunity to review the data, observe the child, and make an informed decision.

Formal criteria help teams make decisions consistently. They also protect us from moving forward based on one unusually strong session or one adult’s impression. At the same time, criteria are not a substitute for thoughtful observation. If the child’s performance looks different from what the data suggest, that difference deserves investigation.

The best decision may be to continue the current target, begin a cautious probe of the next target, or revise how the skill is being measured. What matters is that the decision is based on information rather than on routine alone.

There Is a Difference Between Teaching and Recording Data

Suppose we are reading a book with a child who has already mastered identifying the moon and the fire. The current target is identifying the telephone, so that is what we are formally measuring. While we are reading, we might also introduce the chair or the bear.

There is nothing wrong with providing those additional learning opportunities. In fact, they may be very useful, especially if the child is interested and engaged. But we need to be careful not to record responses to those new targets under the data code for the telephone.

The data need to represent the skill we are actually measuring. We can teach beyond the current target while still keeping our formal measurement accurate. If the child demonstrates readiness for a new target, we can communicate that information and update the instructional plan appropriately.

This distinction protects both the child and the team. Accurate data help us understand what the child can do and make responsible decisions about what to teach next. Informal teaching opportunities can help us discover new interests and abilities without pretending that a new skill has already been formally assessed.

It is also important to communicate clearly when a new target has been introduced informally. Another adult should be able to tell whether the child was practicing an established skill, exploring a possible new skill, or completing a formal teaching trial. Clear communication prevents confusion when different people review the child’s progress.

Challenge Children Without Overwhelming Them

I believe children are often capable of more than we initially realize. But that does not mean we should continually increase difficulty without considering how the child is responding. Good teaching involves finding a balance between providing enough challenge to promote learning and enough support to help the child experience success.

If a child is consistently successful, we may need to make the task more challenging. If the child is struggling, we may need to provide additional instruction, reduce the difficulty, or change how we are presenting the material. The child's performance should guide those decisions.

We also need to consider motivation and engagement. A child who has mastered a skill may become bored if we continue presenting it repeatedly, while a child who is struggling may become frustrated if we move too quickly. Both situations can interfere with learning.

A new challenge should be meaningful, not simply harder for the sake of being harder. If a child has learned to identify pictures, the next useful step might be using those pictures to make a choice. If a child has learned to answer questions about a familiar book, the next step might involve answering questions about a new book or talking about the story with another person.

We should also be willing to adjust the challenge during the activity. A child may be ready for a new target in the morning but need more support later in the day. A child may be ready to work with one new example but not five. Flexible teaching allows us to respond to the child in front of us rather than forcing every session to follow the same path.

Maintenance Still Matters

Moving forward does not mean abandoning everything the child has already learned. Skills can weaken when they are no longer practiced, particularly if they are not used naturally in everyday life. That is why maintenance should remain part of our instructional planning.

Maintenance can often be incorporated into ordinary activities. If a child has mastered identifying familiar objects, we can practice those skills while reading books, playing games, or participating in classroom routines. We do not necessarily need to create a separate teaching session for every mastered target.

A child can practice identifying a cup during snack, finding a coat during a transition, or naming an animal while looking at a book. These opportunities may be brief, but they connect the skill to the situations in which the child is likely to use it.

This allows us to keep previously learned skills strong while dedicating more instructional time to new learning. It also helps us see whether the child is using the skill naturally, rather than only responding during a formal teaching session.

Make Room for Teacher Judgment

Treatment plans and data sheets are important tools, but they are not meant to replace thinking. A plan gives us direction. Data help us evaluate progress. Teacher judgment helps us notice what is happening in the moments between the formal measurements.

A therapist may notice that a child is ready for a more complex request. A teacher may see that a child can complete a classroom routine with less help than expected. A parent may observe a skill at home that has not yet appeared in therapy. Those observations should be shared and considered, even when they do not fit neatly into the current target list.

At the same time, good judgment includes knowing when we need more information. We should not make a major change because a child had one successful attempt. We can pause, gather more observations, consult the team, and plan a careful probe.

This kind of communication helps everyone teach from the same understanding. It also gives the child more consistent opportunities to learn.

Good Teachers Are Always Paying Attention

The most effective teachers do not simply follow a program without thinking. They notice when a child is struggling, when something is becoming too easy, and when an opportunity for new learning presents itself. They also recognize when they need more information before making a decision.

That is the kind of thinking I want to encourage in therapists. Do not be afraid to ask whether a child is ready for something new. Do not be afraid to communicate your observations or suggest that a program may need to change.

The goal is not to complete a certain number of trials or spend a predetermined amount of time on every target. The goal is to help the child learn as effectively as possible.

Sometimes that means providing more practice. Sometimes it means changing the materials or adding support. And sometimes it means recognizing that the child has learned what we set out to teach and is ready to move on.

References

[1] Stokes, T. F., & Baer, D. M. (1977). An implicit technology of generalization. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 10*(2), 349–367. [https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1977.10-349] [2] Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2020). *Applied Behavior Analysis* (3rd ed.). Pearson. [https://www.pearson.com/en-us/subject-catalog/p/applied-behavior-analysis/P200000001665]

Continue learning

Open the companion resource and choose the next practical step.

https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/how-do-you-know-when-a-child-is-ready-to-learn-something-new

About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

Scope and safety

This article provides general educational information. It is not individualized medical, behavioral, mental-health, legal, or emergency advice. Individual support should consider the learner's communication, health, safety, disability-related needs, culture, and context.

How to cite this resource

Beddow, P. (2026). How Do You Know When a Child Is Ready to Learn Something New?. Accessible Behavior. https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/how-do-you-know-when-a-child-is-ready-to-learn-something-new

Copyright © 2026 Accessible Behavior. All rights reserved.

Published article: https://accessiblebehavior.com/resources/how-do-you-know-when-a-child-is-ready-to-learn-something-new/