Incidental Teaching: How Everyday Opportunities Can Expand a Child's Language

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D

Using natural situations to teach children to request, communicate more independently, and gradually develop more sophisticated language.

One of the most useful things we can do when teaching language is learn to recognize opportunities that are already happening throughout the day. Children want things, need help, encounter problems, and have experiences they want to share. Each of those situations can become an opportunity to teach communication.

We do not always need to sit across a table from a child and present a series of pictures to teach language. Sometimes the most meaningful learning happens when the child wants a snack, needs help opening something, wants to play with a toy, or needs to use the bathroom. Those situations provide natural reasons for communication.

In applied behavior analysis, one approach to using these opportunities is called incidental teaching. The idea is to take advantage of naturally occurring situations in which a child is motivated to communicate [1] and use those moments to help expand their language.

What Is Incidental Teaching?

Incidental teaching is a naturalistic teaching approach in which an adult uses a child's interests and naturally occurring opportunities to promote communication and other skills. The adult arranges or recognizes a situation where communication would be useful, waits for or responds to the child's initiation, and provides appropriate assistance to help the child communicate more effectively. The consequence is often naturally connected to what the child communicated.

For example, suppose a child wants a toy car that is sitting on a shelf. The child looks at the car, reaches toward it, or otherwise indicates interest. Rather than simply handing over the car, we can use that moment to help the child communicate what they want.

The amount of language we expect depends on what the child can already do. A child who is just beginning to communicate may need help pointing to a picture or using a single word. A child who can already request using one word may be ready to learn a longer phrase.

The important thing is that the communication is meaningful. The child wants something, and communication helps them obtain it.

Start With What the Child Can Already Do

One mistake adults sometimes make when teaching language is expecting too much too quickly. If a child is just beginning to use words, requiring a complete sentence before providing something they want may create unnecessary frustration. We need to start with the child's current abilities and build from there.

Suppose a child wants a snack and can independently say "snack." That is a functional request, and we should recognize it as communication. We might respond by saying, "Snack! You want a snack," while providing the snack or helping the child access it.

As the child becomes more proficient, we can begin modeling and teaching slightly more complex requests. Maybe the next step is "want snack," followed eventually by "I want snack" or "I want a snack." The progression depends on the child's language abilities and how successfully they are communicating.

We are not trying to make the child repeat a sentence simply because longer sentences sound better. We are helping them develop increasingly flexible and useful language.

Expand the Expectation as the Child Becomes More Capable

We should not keep requiring the same response forever if the child is capable of doing more. As the child develops stronger communication skills, we can gradually increase what we teach and expect.

A child might initially request a toy by pointing to it. We might begin by teaching the child to use a word, sign, or picture symbol for the toy. Once that response becomes independent and reliable, we may introduce a short phrase.

Later, we might teach the child to specify which toy they want. Instead of simply requesting "car," the child may learn to request "red car" or "big car." Eventually, the child might say, "I want the red car," or "Can I have the red car, please?"

Each step builds on the child's existing abilities. The goal is to expand communication without making access to important or desired things unnecessarily difficult.

Use Natural Motivation

One advantage of incidental teaching is that the child already has a reason to communicate. If a child wants a snack, the snack itself provides motivation. If the child wants help opening a container, getting the container opened is a natural consequence of asking for help.

This is different from asking a child to produce language simply because an adult presents an instruction. Both types of teaching can be useful, but naturally motivated communication is especially important because it is closely connected to everyday life.

Imagine a child who loves toy cars. We can create opportunities to request different cars, ask for help opening a container, request another turn, or tell someone which car they want. Those interactions allow us to teach language while the child is engaged in something meaningful.

The child is not just practicing words. They are learning that communication is useful.

Sometimes a Pause Is All You Need

Adults are often very good at anticipating what children want. We see the child reaching for a toy, and we immediately hand it to them. We notice that they want more juice, and we refill the cup before they have an opportunity to ask.

There is nothing wrong with being responsive to children. But if we provide everything before the child has an opportunity to communicate, we may miss natural teaching opportunities. A brief pause can give the child time to initiate a request.

Suppose a child has finished a small serving of a preferred snack and is looking toward the container. Instead of immediately providing more, I might pause and give the child an opportunity to communicate. If the child says "more," points to a picture, signs, or uses another established response, I can respond to that communication.

As the child becomes more capable, I may model a more specific phrase such as "more crackers" or "I want more crackers." But I do not want to turn every request into a test or withhold something important simply because the child has not produced the exact phrase I hoped for.

The purpose of the pause is to create an opportunity for communication, not to make the child struggle.

Teach Children to Request Help

Incidental teaching is particularly useful for teaching children to request help. Throughout the day, children encounter situations where something is difficult or they cannot complete a task independently. Those moments provide natural opportunities to teach functional communication.

Suppose a child is trying to open a container and cannot get the lid off. Instead of immediately opening it, I might wait briefly to see whether the child requests assistance. If the child becomes frustrated or clearly

needs support, I can model an appropriate response such as “Help,” “Help me,” or “Can you help me open it?”

Then I provide the assistance. The child experiences a direct connection between communicating and receiving help.

As the child’s skills develop, we can expand the language. A child who initially says “help” might eventually learn to say, “Help open,” “Help me open it,” or “Can you help me open this?” The expectation should reflect the child’s current abilities and the communication system they use.

Teach Communication for Important Needs

Bathroom communication shows why natural opportunities matter. A child might learn to assemble the sentence “I want bathroom” using a picture communication system when an adult asks, “What do you want?” But that does not necessarily mean the child will independently request the bathroom when they actually need to go.

Those are different skills. In the first situation, the child is responding to an adult’s instruction. In the second, the child is recognizing a need and initiating communication to get that need met.

During scheduled bathroom routines, we can model and practice the appropriate communication response. We also need to pay attention to naturally occurring opportunities. If the child begins showing signs that they may need the bathroom, we can make their communication system available and support them in communicating that need.

Over time, we want the child to become less dependent on adult prompts. The goal is for the child to recognize the need and independently communicate it at home, at school, and in the community.

Distinguish Prompted Language From Spontaneous Communication

Language that occurs because an adult prompts it and language the child initiates independently are both important, but they tell us different things about the child’s skills.

Suppose I hold up a snack and say, “Say, ‘I want crackers.’” The child repeats, “I want crackers.” That is a prompted response, and it may be useful practice.

Now suppose the child sees the crackers, approaches me, and independently says, “I want crackers.” That is spontaneous functional communication. The child has recognized an opportunity to communicate and initiated the request without being told what to say.

That distinction matters because our long-term goal is usually for children to communicate when they have something to say, not only when someone asks them to speak.

Do Not Make Communication Unnecessarily Difficult

There is a balance to maintain when expanding language. We want to challenge children and help them develop more sophisticated communication, but we do not want to make communication so demanding that it becomes frustrating or ineffective. If a child is thirsty, access to water should not depend on producing a longer sentence.

We can model expanded language without requiring the child to imitate it every time. If the child says “water,” I might respond, “You want some water. Here you go.” That provides a language model while still honoring the child’s request.

For other opportunities, particularly when the child is comfortable, motivated, and already capable of more complex language, we may arrange a brief teaching opportunity. The expectation should be appropriate, and the child should continue experiencing communication as something useful.

We also need to respect different communication methods. A child who uses pictures, signs, gestures, or an AAC device can participate in incidental teaching just as meaningfully as a child who speaks.

Language Is More Than Requesting

Requesting is often a useful starting point because children naturally want and need things throughout the day. But language instruction should also create opportunities to comment, ask questions, share experiences, protest, make choices, and interact socially.

Suppose a child sees a dog outside the window. That can become an opportunity to comment, “Dog!” or “Big dog!” We might respond by expanding the language: “Yes, that’s a big brown dog.”

Or perhaps the child is playing with cars and one rolls under the furniture. We can use that situation to teach language such as “Where car?” or “The car is under the table.” These are natural opportunities to build vocabulary and sentence structure in meaningful contexts.

The more we recognize those opportunities, the more language teaching becomes part of everyday life rather than something that happens only during designated instructional periods.

The Goal Is Independent, Functional Communication

When I think about incidental teaching, I think about helping children become increasingly capable communicators. I want them to recognize that they can use language to influence their environment, express preferences, ask for assistance, and share what they are thinking. I want those skills to work outside the therapy room.

That is why we need to keep expanding our expectations as children become more capable. A child who initially points to request something may eventually learn to use a word. A child who uses one word may learn to use a phrase, and a child who uses phrases may develop more complex sentences.

But we should always remember why we are teaching those skills. The purpose is not to make children produce longer and longer sentences simply because we can. It is to give them increasingly effective ways to communicate.

Some of the best opportunities to do that are already happening all around us, every day.

References

[1] Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1982). How to use incidental teaching to teach language. *Education and Treatment of Children, 5*(4), 391–398. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/42894179] [2] American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). [https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/professional-issues/augmentative-and-alternative-communication/]

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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.

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