



Why Children Need to Keep Practicing Skills They've Already Mastered

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Understanding skill maintenance and how to keep learning meaningful without unnecessary repetition.

One of the challenges in teaching children is knowing what to do after they have mastered a skill. We spend time teaching something new, collect data showing that the child can perform it independently, and eventually move on to the next target. But does that mean we should stop practicing the original skill altogether?

Not necessarily. Just because a child has learned something does not mean the skill will remain strong forever without opportunities to use it. At the same time, we do not want to spend so much time reviewing mastered skills that we neglect new learning.

The goal is to find a balance between maintaining what the child already knows and helping them continue to develop new abilities.

What Is Skill Maintenance?

In applied behavior analysis, maintenance refers to the continued performance of a learned skill over time [2] after the original teaching procedures have been reduced or discontinued. A child may demonstrate mastery during instruction, but we also want to know whether the skill remains available weeks or months later. That is especially important for skills the child does not use frequently in everyday life.

For example, suppose we have taught a child to identify several objects in a book. The child can correctly identify the moon, the telephone, and the fireplace. Once those targets are mastered, we may begin teaching new objects.

But if the child never has another opportunity to identify the previously mastered objects, we do not know whether those skills will remain strong. Periodically practicing them helps us evaluate maintenance and provides opportunities to strengthen the responses.

Maintenance is not a sign that the child failed to learn. It is a way of making sure that learning remains useful over time.

Maintenance Does Not Have to Be Boring

I was recently talking with a therapist about a program using the book *Goodnight Moon*. The child had already mastered identifying some of the objects in the story, but we were still working on identifying the telephone. The therapist wondered whether she should continue asking the child to identify objects that were already mastered.

My answer was yes, especially because we were reading a book together. Reading *Goodnight Moon* is an enjoyable activity, and pointing to familiar pictures can be part of that experience. We do not need to stop asking about the moon simply because the child already knows where it is.

We can continue incorporating mastered skills naturally while focusing formal instruction and data collection on the current target. That way, the child gets opportunities to practice without spending unnecessary time on repetitive drills.

A mastered skill can also appear in play, classroom routines, conversations, outings, and self-care activities. If a child has learned to identify a cup, we might use that skill during snack. If the child has learned to follow a familiar direction, we might include it in a classroom transition. These brief opportunities can be more meaningful than repeating the same question many times at a table.

Do Not Confuse Maintenance With Acquisition

Acquisition refers to learning a new skill, while maintenance refers to continuing to demonstrate a skill that has already been learned. These are different instructional purposes, and they may require different amounts of teaching time.

A new skill might need frequent practice, prompting, and carefully arranged learning opportunities. A mastered skill may require only occasional practice to remain strong. Sometimes the child naturally uses the skill throughout the day, so little additional maintenance programming is necessary. Other skills may



need more deliberate opportunities because they do not occur frequently in the child's ordinary environment.

We should make those decisions based on the individual child and the skill. There is not one maintenance schedule that is appropriate for every target.

It can help to ask a few practical questions. Does the child use this skill naturally? How often does the skill occur in daily life? Has the child shown the skill with different people and materials? What happens when the skill is not practiced for a period of time? The answers can help us decide whether natural opportunities are enough or whether more structured practice is needed.

Why We Should Not Keep Teaching the Same Thing Forever

Suppose I am working with a child who has mastered labeling 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 the child has consistently demonstrated those skills across different people and situations, I probably do not need to spend the rest of the session asking the same questions. The child already knows the answers, and our time may be better spent teaching something new.

That does not mean we never practice those labels again. It means we can incorporate them into everyday activities rather than continuing intensive instruction that is no longer necessary.

Repeatedly presenting an easy target can also make learning less engaging. A child may become bored when the instructional experience never changes, while another child may learn that participation only involves answering questions when an adult presents a card. Thoughtful maintenance keeps the skill available without allowing old targets to crowd out new opportunities.

Generalization Helps Support Maintenance

One of the best ways to help children maintain skills is to teach them to use those skills in meaningful situations. If a child learns to identify a car from a picture card, we can practice identifying cars in books, during play, and while riding in the car. The skill becomes connected to the child's everyday experiences.

This also supports generalization. The child learns that the word "car" applies to many different cars rather than one particular picture used during instruction. As the skill becomes useful in more situations, the child may have more natural opportunities to practice it.

That is an important goal. We do not want children to demonstrate skills only when someone presents instructional materials and asks a question. We want them to use what they have learned in their everyday lives.

Generalization also gives us better information about the strength of the skill. A child may identify a familiar picture during therapy but need more support identifying a real object at home or school. That difference does not mean the teaching was wasted. It tells us where additional practice is needed and what conditions should be included in future instruction.

Keep Maintenance Data Meaningful

Maintenance data do not need to look exactly like acquisition data. During acquisition, we may collect frequent information to decide whether a new teaching procedure is working. During maintenance, we may check performance periodically or record how the skill appears during ordinary routines.

The measurement should still be clear enough to help us make decisions. We should know what response we are looking for, whether the child responded independently, and what conditions surrounded the opportunity. If the child needed a prompt, we should record that rather than describing the response as fully independent.

We also need to distinguish maintenance from a new teaching trial. If a child answers a familiar question during a story, that may be a natural maintenance opportunity. If we arrange repeated practice because the child is beginning to struggle, we may be returning to more intensive instruction. Both can be appropriate, but they serve different purposes and should be described accurately.

What If a Mastered Skill Starts to Decline?

Sometimes a child begins making mistakes on a skill that was previously mastered. When that happens, we need to investigate rather than simply assuming the child has forgotten everything. Perhaps the materials have changed, the instruction is being presented differently, or the child has not had enough opportunities to practice.

We may need to provide additional teaching or temporarily increase the frequency of practice. We should also consider whether the original mastery criterion adequately demonstrated that the skill was established. Sometimes what looked like mastery was actually performance under a narrow set of conditions.

It is also worth considering changes in the child's life. A new classroom, different communication partner, illness, fatigue, stress, or a change in motivation may affect performance. A decline in one setting does not necessarily mean the skill has disappeared everywhere.

The important thing is to respond to what we are observing. Maintenance data help us determine whether a skill remains strong and whether additional instruction is necessary.

Maintenance Is Not the Same as Keeping a Child Stuck

Some adults worry that continuing to practice old skills means a child will not move forward. That can happen if maintenance is planned poorly, but it is not an unavoidable part of maintenance.

The purpose is not to keep a child working on the same target forever. The purpose is to protect useful learning while making room for new challenges. A child can practice familiar labels during a book while learning to answer a new kind of question. They can follow a mastered classroom routine while learning a new self-care step. They can use an established communication response while learning to communicate a more complex message.

Maintenance and acquisition can happen within the same activity. The difference lies in what the child is already expected to know, what is being taught, and what information the team is collecting.



Keep Learning Moving Forward

I want children to continue developing new skills, but I also want them to retain the skills they have already learned. Those goals are not in conflict. We can maintain familiar skills while introducing new challenges and expanding what children can do.

The key is to avoid treating every mastered target as something that requires the same amount of instructional attention forever. Some skills can be maintained naturally, while others may need periodic structured practice. Good teaching involves knowing the difference.

When we plan maintenance thoughtfully, we protect previous learning without allowing it to crowd out new opportunities. We give children chances to use what they know, notice when a skill needs support, and keep moving toward meaningful independence.

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>]
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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.

Scope and safety

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