

# Preference-Based Teaching: Helping Students With Severe Disabilities Enjoy Learning Without Problem Behavior

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## Abstract

An impediment to teaching that occurs with many students who have severe disabilities is problem behavior during teaching sessions. This paper describes *preference-based teaching*, a recently developed means of reducing problem behavior by making teaching programs enjoyable for students. Preference-based teaching begins with actions taken prior to beginning teaching sessions to set the occasion for an enjoyable student experience. A step-wise process subsequently is used to incorporate student preferences within the teaching process. Brief, preferred activities are conducted immediately before initiating a teaching session to enhance student responsiveness to the teacher. Preferred activities are then built into the instructional process (e.g., interspersing easy instructional tasks or brief breaks), and each teaching session is followed by a highly preferred student activity. Results of applied research have supported the efficacy and practicality of enhancing student enjoyment through preference-based teaching, resulting in benefits for both student and teacher.

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## Keywords

preference-based teaching, student interests, student responses, student behavior

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An obstacle to successful teaching with many students who have severe disabilities is problem behavior that occurs during teaching sessions. Problem behavior among students with highly significant cognitive challenges can be displayed in a variety of forms including aggression toward the teacher, physical resistance to teaching trials, and disruption of teaching materials. Such behavior seriously impedes teaching effectiveness and makes teaching sessions unpleasant for both student and teacher.

Problem behavior may occur during teaching sessions for a number of reasons. However, underlying many reasons is student dislike of certain aspects of the teaching process (Foster-Johnson, Ferro, & Dunlap, 1994). Dislike of teaching procedures can be due to the effort required to respond to instructions, physical prompting strategies employed by the teacher, or unpleasant experiences associated with poor success on previous teaching programs. When students are discontented with teaching programs for these and related reasons, they are likely to use problem behavior to avoid participating in a teaching session or to cause an ongoing session to be discontinued.

A frequent course of action when students with disabilities display problem behavior during teaching is to develop individualized behavior support plans to reduce the problem behavior. Although such plans can be effective, at times they do not address the source of the problem: student dislike of the teaching process. A more direct and often more pleasant way to reduce problem behavior during teaching is to make the teaching process more enjoyable. If students enjoy participating in teaching sessions, there is no reason for them to engage in problem behavior to avoid or escape the sessions. A recently developed, evidence-based means of making

teaching programs enjoyable for students with severe disabilities is *preference-based teaching*.

**When students enjoy participating in teaching programs, there is no reason for them to use problem behavior as a means to avoid or escape teaching sessions.**

#### *What is Preference-Based Teaching?*

Preference-based teaching represents a recent synthesis of results of applied research organized into a step-wise approach for making teaching programs enjoyable for students who have severe disabilities. Component steps of preference-based teaching are based on investigations that demonstrated the effectiveness of respective procedures for reducing problem behavior and/or enhancing enjoyment among people with disabilities (see Reid & Green, 2005, for a summary). The effectiveness of the overall preference-based teaching approach for enhancing enjoyment and reducing problem behavior has likewise been demonstrated (Green & Reid, 1999; Green, Reid, Rollyson, & Passante, 2005).

The essence of preference-based teaching involves identifying student preferences and then designing teaching programs in consideration of those preferences. Items and activities students prefer are incorporated within the teaching process. In addition, activities or events that students dislike are removed from the process where possible.

Preference-based teaching can be used with any typical teaching program for students with severe disabilities. However, research with the process has focused on teaching programs involving four basic components: (1) a task analysis of the skill being taught, (2) a least-to-most assistive prompt process to help the student perform steps that

the student does not know how to perform, (3) quickly correcting errors a student might make, and (4) reinforcing correct step completions. A description of this teaching approach along with a relatively quick means of training in how to use the approach has been presented previously in *Teaching Exceptional Children* (Parsons & Reid, 1999).

### **Basic Components of Preference-Based Teaching**

#### *Setting the Occasion for An Enjoyable Teaching Session*

Preference-based teaching begins with actions taken prior to initiating teaching sessions to enhance a student's enjoyment with the teaching process. The most critical action is for a teacher to spend time with the student to establish a good relationship or rapport with the student. Although a good relationship involves many things, from the perspective of enhancing a student's enjoyment in participating in teaching sessions, the most important is that the student *enjoys interacting with the teacher*.

There are several key steps a teacher can take to help a student enjoy interacting with the teacher. The first step is for the teacher to spend time doing things with the student for the sole purpose of helping the student have fun. Often, and especially with new students and those students who previously have displayed problem behavior, several different activities will have to be tried before the teacher observes apparent signs of enjoyment on the student's part. Such activities may involve different games, individualized social interactions, or simply doing something with the student that the student is known to like (e.g., going for walks). Whatever a teacher does in this respect, it is essential that different activities be tried until the

student is clearly enjoying what the teacher is doing with the student (see Reid & Green, in press, for a description of identifying enjoyment among people with severe disabilities). Our experience suggests that if such activities are conducted for at least 15 minutes or so daily, it often takes only about a week for the student to show signs of enjoying interactions with the teacher.

A second step a teacher can take to establish rapport with a student prior to beginning teaching sessions is to become familiar with a student's dislikes and then help the student avoid or change things that are disliked. For example, a student may appear to become upset when a certain peer is in close proximity. A teacher may intercede and redirect the peer away from the student or help the student move elsewhere in the classroom when the peer approaches the student. By taking specific actions to help a student avoid disliked situations, the student begins to associate the teacher with making the overall classroom environment less unpleasant and therefore, more enjoyable.

**Arguably the most important thing a teacher can do to set the occasion for student enjoyment with teaching sessions is for the teacher to establish a good relationship with the student prior to initiating the sessions.**

In addition to establishing rapport with a student, it is helpful if the teacher arranges the environment in which a session will occur to suit the student's preference. Often there are aspects of a classroom environment that a student likes and dislikes. A teaching session will be more enjoyable for the student if teaching occurs in association with those aspects that the student likes. To illustrate, some students may like working with the teacher at the teacher's desk, whereas other students

may prefer a special, quiet place in the classroom that is reserved just for the student's teaching sessions.

### *Identifying Student Preferences*

In order to apply preference-based teaching, a teacher must accurately identify a student's individual preferences. Particular preferences for some students are readily apparent in that the students clearly express their likes and dislikes. For many other students with severe disabilities, and especially those who have significant communication challenges, expressing specific likes and dislikes is more difficult. For the latter students, special procedures are often necessary to identify their preferences.

The easiest and most common way to identify student preferences is to solicit the opinions of people who know the student very well. However, research has shown that care must be taken when relying on the opinions of support personnel to identify preferences of students with severe disabilities (Lohrmann-O'Rourke & Browder, 1998). There are several guidelines that can enhance the likelihood that a teacher's judgment regarding what a student appears to like accurately reflects the student's preferences.

**Guidelines for Enhancing Accuracy of Teacher Judgment Regarding Student Preferences:**

1. Focus on most and least favorite items and activities.
2. Ensure familiarity with the student within exact situations in which teaching will occur.
3. Obtain agreement with others regarding preferences.

The first guideline is a direct outcome of research on identifying preferences among people with severe disabilities: support per-

sonnel typically are more accurate in identifying what individuals like the most and least relative to identifying more moderate preferences (e.g., Green, Reid, Canipe, & Gardner, 1991). Hence, when determining what events to use within a teaching program, a teacher's opinion is more likely to truly reflect a student's preference if that opinion focuses on what the student likes the most.

Another guideline for increasing the likelihood that a teacher's judgment about a student's preferences is accurate is to make sure the teacher is familiar with the student in the situation in which teaching sessions will occur (Newton, Ard, & Horner, 1993). Such familiarity usually occurs naturally if the teacher has worked with the student for at least several weeks in the environment in which teaching sessions typically occur. Accuracy is also likely to be enhanced if two people familiar with a student agree on a student's most preferred items and activities (guideline number three) relative to only one person identifying a student's preference (Parsons et al., 2005).

Although employing these guidelines can enhance a teacher's ability to accurately identify a student's preferences to incorporate within teaching programs, the guidelines are not foolproof. If a teacher experiences uncertainty about a student's preferences or does not observe obvious signs of student enjoyment when provided access to presumed preferences, then more detailed procedures are necessary to determine student preferences. Such procedures typically involve *systematic preference assessments*.

Systematic preference assessments generally entail providing a student with repeated choices regarding activities or items with which to engage and then observing which activities or items the student chooses most frequently. Although it is beyond the

scope of this paper to describe systematic preference assessments, other sources are available. Two sources that we have found particularly helpful are presented below.

**Resource Information for Conducting Systematic Preference Assessments**

Hughes, C., Pitken, S. E., & Lorden, S. W. (1998). Assessing preferences and choices of persons with severe and profound mental retardation. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 33, 299-316.

Lohrmann-O'Rourke, S., Browder, D. M., & Brown, F. (2000). Guidelines for conducting socially valid systematic preference assessments. *Journal of The Association for Persons With Severe Handicaps*, 25, 42-53.

*Preferred ABC Model*

A conceptual model underlying many teaching programs for students with severe disabilities is the *Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence* or *ABC Model*. The *A* or *antecedent* part pertains to what is done to promote student performance of a skill being taught, typically through prompting. The *B* part refers to the target *behavior* that the teacher desires the student to demonstrate, and the *C* part consists of the *consequence* of the student's target behavior applied by the teacher to reinforce or correct performance.

The *ABC Model* also represents a conceptual basis for preference-based teaching. However, in contrast to the more traditional application of the model intended to promote correct student performance of the skill being taught, in preference-based teaching the model is applied to enhance student enjoyment with the teaching process. When used in this manner, the model is more aptly referred to as the *Preferred ABC Model*.

The Preferred ABC Model pertains to what is done to enhance student enjoyment with a teaching session immediately before the teaching session (the *A* or antecedent component), as part of teacher instructional behavior (the *B* or behavior component), and immediately after the session (the *C* or consequence component). Each component involves providing activities or items that the student prefers.

**The Preferred ABC Model: enhancing student enjoyment by providing preferred events as antecedents to a teaching session, as part of instructional behavior, and as a consequence to a teaching session.**

Before discussing application of the Preferred ABC Model, it should be noted that the *timing* of when a teaching session is conducted can also have a significant impact on student enjoyment. Two features of the timing of a teaching session are particularly important (Reid & Green, 2005, chap. 9). First, whenever possible, attempts should be made to avoid interrupting an ongoing preferred activity in which a student is engaged in order to conduct a teaching session. Students can be displeased to have to discontinue an ongoing preferred activity when the teacher initiates a teaching session, and such displeasure can carry over to the teaching session. Teachers should consider the daily schedule and try to arrange a teaching session following a typical daily event that is not highly preferred by a student (e.g., following a classroom transition).

A second consideration regarding the timing of a teaching session is to attempt to conduct a session following a period of time during which the student has had limited access to preferred activities that will be used as part of the session. For example, if special

time with the teacher is used as a preferred event to capitalize on a student's desire for the teacher's attention, then the teaching session should follow a time period in which the student has received little individualized attention from the teacher (e.g., following a group activity in which the teacher's attention is divided among all students present). Providing preferred activities following periods of limited student access to the activities can enhance their preferred nature when applied during a teaching session relative to if the student has had recent exposure to the events.

#### *Providing preferred events immediately before a teaching session*

The intent in providing preferred events immediately prior to a teaching session is several-fold (Green & Reid, 1999). First, involving a student in a preferred activity helps the student enjoy the beginning of a teaching session. In essence, such a process can help put the student in a "good mood" before instructional trials begin. A second effect is that the process promotes active responding by the student in conjunction with a teacher-led action. Such responding frequently carries over to subsequent teaching trials.

What a teacher does immediately before a teaching session should be based on the student's individual preferences and should be brief in nature, lasting no more than a few minutes. Some of the events we have used to initiate student enjoyment in this regard include briefly massaging a student's shoulders, joking with a student, and engaging a student in a brief conversation about something of interest to the student. It can also be most helpful if a distinct choice is provided to a student, such as a choice of two materials with which to complete a teaching task or a choice of where to work on a task.

In addition to keeping the preferred antecedent events brief, the events should lead directly into the first instructional trial of the teaching task without any break in time. If the initial activities are not brief or are followed by a lapse of time before the instructional process begins, the activities can be viewed as a discreet set of events in and of itself. When the latter situation occurs, the student can be reluctant to begin the teaching session, preferring at that time to resume the previous activity.

#### *Providing preferred events during instruction*

The second part of the Preferred ABC Model involves providing preferred events while instruction is ongoing. There are three primary ways to incorporate preferences within the instructional process. The first way is to occasionally provide the student with brief access to preferred items or activities between instructional trials (Green et al., 2005). For example, for those teaching programs that involve relatively large numbers of task-analyzed steps, a brief break can be taken between designated steps early in the sequence and then again later in the sequence. Examples of student-preferred items and activities we have used during the teaching process have included giving the student a brief stretch break, briefly talking to the student in a pleasant manner, and providing a favorite item to hold for a few seconds.

The second way in which preferred events can be incorporated within the teaching process involves periodically providing brief instructional trials on skills that may not be a part of the target skill per se but represent skills with which the student is already proficient. This *interspersal* process (Horner, Day, Sprague, O'Brien, & Heathfield, 1991) is particularly advantageous for students who have difficulty performing steps with the tar-

get skill and appear frustrated or displeased with their lack of success. By periodically asking a student to do something the student can easily perform, the student has increased opportunities to experience success, which in turn, reduces frustration. Occasionally interspersing easy tasks among difficult tasks also provides the teacher with increased opportunities to praise the student's correct performance, which can help make the teaching process more pleasant for the student.

The third way preferred events can be incorporated within the instructional process involves providing a brief break and preferred activity following signs of student discontent (Green et al., 2005). Following the break and activity, it is critical to return to where instruction was discontinued and then prompt the student through that part of the instructional trial. In this manner, the student's discontent does not result in the student avoiding completion of the trial but rather, allows the student a break and distraction from whatever was unpleasant. It should be noted though that because this procedure can run the risk of reinforcing behavior reflecting student discontent by temporarily discontinuing instructional procedures when such behavior occurs, it should be used with some caution. If signs of discontent occur across instructional trials when the procedure is applied, it probably should be omitted from the overall preference-based approach.

#### *Providing a preferred consequence after a teaching session*

One of the most powerful ways to enhance student enjoyment with a teaching program is to follow each teaching session with a highly preferred activity (Green & Reid, 1999). Immediately after each teaching session, a teacher should support the student in doing something the student seriously enjoys.

The intent is for the student to associate participating in, and completing, a teaching session as leading to something that is clearly enjoyable and fun.

An opportune means of ensuring that a highly preferred event follows a teaching session is to provide the student with a choice of what to do once the session is completed (Cooper & Browder, 1998). To maximize the preferred nature of what is chosen by the student, it is helpful if the choice involves two highly preferred options in contrast to something that is not strongly preferred. Choices we have provided to allow students opportunities to engage in a highly preferred event following a teaching session include a choice of listening to music or sitting outside, a choice between two favorite snack items, and a choice of going to the book or computer center in a classroom.

When providing a highly preferred event immediately after a teaching session, it is important to note the purpose of the event relative to reinforcement procedures used during the actual teaching process. As summarized earlier, reinforcing correct student completion of steps in the task analysis of the skill being taught is a key part of effective teaching. Typically, teacher praise is used in attempts to reinforce correct student performance. Such praise should immediately follow each student response that the teacher wants to reinforce. In contrast, the consequence provided after the entire teaching session is not designed to reinforce student performance per se, but to help make the overall teaching process enjoyable. In the typical preference-based teaching process, a teacher praises the student's correct completion of the last step in the task analysis and then presents a highly preferred consequence upon completion of the teaching session.

## Putting It All Together With Preference-Based Teaching

As the preceding discussion illustrates, preference-based teaching includes a variety of procedures a teacher can use to make teaching programs enjoyable for a student with severe disabilities and reduce the likelihood of problem behavior. We have discussed the key components of this approach (see Reid & Green, 2005, for additional preference-based procedures). The checklist on this page provides a brief summary of these procedures.

In considering preference-based teaching procedures as summarized in the checklist, it should be noted that it is not always feasible to incorporate each procedure within

every application of a teaching program. In this regard, questions arise concerning whether preference-based teaching requires additional time to conduct teaching programs relative to more traditional teaching processes. Preference-based teaching usually does require extra time to carry out a teaching program, ranging from only a few extra minutes per teaching session to as much as an additional 20 minutes or so (Green et al., 2005).

The amount of extra time involved in carrying out preference-based teaching depends on the types of preferred items and activities incorporated within the teaching process, and how many of the procedures are built into the Preferred ABC Model. In many

### A CHECKLIST OF KEY COMPONENTS OF PREFERENCE-BASED TEACHING

#### I. When initially considering developing a teaching program for a student:

- Spend time developing rapport with the student
- Participate with the student in activities the student enjoys
- Change the environment to remove features a student dislikes

#### II. Set a preferred time and location for the teaching session:

- Do not interrupt an ongoing, highly preferred activity
- Arrange the session after a period in which the student had limited access to preferred events to be used during the session
- Identify a preferred student location for the session

#### III. Immediately before the teaching session:

- Engage the student in a brief preferred activity
- Provide a choice to the student about some aspect of how the teaching session will proceed

#### IV. During the teaching session:

- Provide brief, preferred activities between some instructional trials
- Provide a brief break and preferred activity following signs of student discontent, followed immediately with a return to the part of the instructional trial where the break occurred

#### V. Immediately after the teaching session:

- Provide a choice of a preferred activity for the student
- Make sure a *highly preferred* activity is available for the student

cases, teachers will only need to use some of the procedures discussed to this point to witness increased student enjoyment. Our experience suggests that the most important components are establishing a good relationship with the student and providing a highly preferred consequence following each teaching session. For students who typically display problem behavior during teaching sessions or are otherwise known to dislike teaching sessions, other components of the overall process are likely to be needed.

It should also be noted that even though applications of preference-based teaching can extend the amount of time to conduct a teaching session, the extra time often diminishes across successive teaching sessions as a student becomes more responsive to the teaching process – due in large part to increased student enjoyment. Most importantly, the extra minutes involved in applying preference-based teaching can be well worth the increased time investment. Again, when students enjoy teaching programs, problem behavior is not likely to occur during teaching sessions. The end result benefits both the student and teacher. For the student, acquiring new skills through participation in teaching programs can become a favorably anticipated part of the day. For the teacher, it can be a rewarding and enjoyable experience to observe a student having a good time while learning new skills.

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