

HOW We Teach: Part 1:

- Introduction to Error-Free Learning

- Partializing the Learning Activity -

How to Introduce the Learning Activity to Clients

In the previous lessons, we looked at WHY we teach skills to people with disabilities (the 3I-P's to promote Independence, Individuality, Inclusion and Productivity) and WHAT we teach (ADL's, Adaptive Behavior/Social Rules, and Communication). In this lesson, we will begin to look at HOW we teach by examining a technique called Error-Free Learning and learning about a couple of specific Error-Free Learning techniques.

INTRODUCTION TO ERROR-FREE LEARNING

HOW we teach is very important! Since our ultimate goal is to help our clients learn important skills, we want to learn METHODS of teaching that are most likely to achieve this goal. In this unit of the course, you will be learning about something called ERROR-FREE LEARNING.

Error-free learning is a method of teaching where the helping professional does NOT call attention to errors that the client makes when learning ADLs, adaptive behavior/social rules, and communication. Instead, when a mistake is made by the learner, the professional simply guides the learner so that they can perform the task or behavior correctly and then rewards the learner with praise so that the learning is re-inforced. Error-free learning consists of many specific teaching techniques. In this lesson and the following ones, you will learn these specific teaching techniques.

Why use error-free learning: If you think back over the many lessons (both life lessons and academic lessons) you have learned in your life, you probably learned many of them through trial and error... that is, you made mistakes, someone pointed out these mistakes or you noticed them yourself and then you learned from these mistakes. So... why error free learning? Why not tell the client what they did wrong and what they should do in the future? Doesn't your client need to know what's right and what's wrong? Of course, when a mistake can cause serious injury such as a client running into the street without looking, it is important to point this out. However, this is a relatively rare occurrence. The vast majority of mistakes that clients make are trivial and a client can actually benefit from being guided to perform a task correctly and having their mistakes ignored. Let's take a look at this in more depth!

In fact, there are several important reasons why error-free learning (i.e., not pointing out mistakes but instead guiding your client to complete the task correctly) is useful in helping clients to learn:

- 1) MAKING LEARNING EASIER BY REDUCING THE AMOUNT THAT MUST BE LEARNED: If you tell your client what he or she did wrong and then what

they should do to be right, you have now DOUBLED the information they must learn (i.e., they must now learn what's wrong plus what's right). An example may help you understand this. Let's say you meet someone named "Jennifer." You're a little distracted and don't really focus on learning her name. The next time you see her, you know her name is something that begins with a "J" so you say, "Hi! It's Jessica, right?" She says "My name is not Jessica, it's Jennifer." The next time you see her you know her name is EITHER Jessica or Jennifer but you still don't remember which one is right and which one is wrong. This kind of thing has probably happened to you in your studies, as well. For example, when taking a multiple choice test, you narrowed your answer down to two options but then weren't sure which one was the right one.

2) **BUILDING CLIENT SELF-CONFIDENCE BY BUILDING SUCCESS IN LEARNING:** There are many types of disabilities that can affect a client's ability to learn such as learning disabilities, some developmental disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism, school anxiety disorder and so on. Most people who struggle with learning are already aware that they struggle, and as a result, approach learning activities with low self confidence and anxiety. In other words, they already doubt that they can learn and may try to avoid learning activities. They also may feel like they are not as good as "normal" learners and may wonder what is wrong with them. Error-free learning focuses on success rather than failure. Through a variety of techniques, the learner is guided to perform skills correctly, gradually becoming more and more independent, and is rewarded with praise and encouragement. In error-free learning, failure is not mentioned or pointed out. Therefore, clients gradually comes to believe that they can learn and they experience the self confidence that comes from mastering skills.

3) **BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIENT AND HELPING PROFESSIONAL:** People tend to avoid situations and people that are painful. As mentioned above, clients who have difficulty learning often try to avoid situations where they will be expected to learn because they have experienced painful failures and self doubt in this area. This means that many people with difficulty learning may distrust the professional and try to avoid him or her. Using error-free learning which builds success and where no attention is given to failure, helps create a bond and a sense of trust between client and helping professional. These positive associations build trust and make the client more willing to work with the professional in the future... thus opening up additional learning opportunities.

Error-Free Learning Technique #1: Partializing the Learning Activity BEFORE teaching it!

Partializing, which means breaking down an activity into its component parts, is a very important teaching technique when teaching ADL skills because it makes a

complex activity easier to learn. It is important to remember that partializing is done BEFORE the helping professional begins helping a client to learn an ADL skill. To illustrate what partializing is exactly, let's imagine that you want to get yourself a glass of orange juice which is a simple ADL skill. To you, getting a glass of juice for yourself seems like ONE task. In fact, however, if we PARTIALIZE this task, you will see that getting yourself a glass of juice actually consists of MANY smaller tasks:

- going to the kitchen
- opening the cabinet door where the glasses are
- taking a glass and putting it on the counter
- shutting the cabinet door
- opening the refrigerator
- selecting the juice
- closing the refrigerator
- opening the container of juice
- pouring the juice
- closing the container of juice
- opening the refrigerator
- putting the juice back in the refrigerator
- closing the refrigerator door

To help you understand and empathize with the importance of partializing, i.e., breaking down an ADL task into component parts and then teaching this ADL task in the same order each time, I want you to imagine that you are taking a required math class at Kingsborough where you are struggling to learn the steps needed to solve complicated math problems. You know that you will need to memorize these steps in order so that you can solve the math problems on your final exam. What is important for you to see in this example is that to you client, learning a simple ADL task may feel exactly like solving a complicated math problem feels to you!

Now, imagine that you are talking with a friend who is good at math and are seeking that person's help in solving complicated math problems. As you struggle to follow the steps to solve the math problem, your friend says to you: "yeah, you can do it that way if you want, but you can also do it this other way... and then there's this other way..." HONESTLY... don't you want to murder them? (kidding) or at least curse them out? This is because when you are struggling to learn something that is complicated and hard for you to learn, you want to learn it one way and one way only!

The same thing holds true when we are teaching ADL skills to clients who struggle with learning. BEFORE we begin teaching an ADL skill, we PARTIALIZE it into its component parts and TEACH IT IN THE SAME ORDER EACH TIME! So, back to our "getting a glass of juice" example: BEFORE we begin teaching a client how to get themselves a glass of juice, we make a plan by partializing that task and then we teach the subparts of the task in the SAME ORDER each time we practice the task with the client.

IMPORTANT: If you look at the partialized task of getting a glass of juice described above, you will see that the ORDER of some of the tasks could be changed. So, for example, you could get the juice out of the refrigerator BEFORE getting the glass out of the cabinet. However, just like you wouldn't

want your friend to make your life more complicated by showing you multiple ways to solve a math problem, you do NOT want to point out multiple ways to perform the ADL task to your client. This is why we create a plan for teaching an ADL skill step by step BEFORE we start teaching this ADL skill to our client and we TEACH THE SKILL IN THE SAME ORDER OF STEPS each time we work with the client on that skill. This greatly helps the client learn the skill and minimizes confusion!

We should NOT attempt to teach ADL skills without PARTIALIZING (breaking down the skill into steps) BEFORE we work with our clients!

Error-Free Learning Technique #2: Introducing the Learning Activity

The technique you use to introduce a learning activity to a client is important. Your introduction should be friendly, upbeat and brief (like 30 seconds at most brief!) Hands on learning works best with most people... in other words, you want to keep the introduction very brief and get the client actively engaged in the learning process as quickly as possible. As you may have noticed in your classes, long introductions and long lectures tend to be boring and discouraging. Classes become way more interesting when there is hands on learning, i.e., when students can participate and when there are group learning activities. VERY IMPORTANT: Do NOT ask the client if he or she would like to participate. Instead say something like: "Hi John! Today we're going to work together so you learn how to put on your jacket by yourself rather than having to wait for someone to help you!"

At first glance, this may sound bossy and even a little mean. It may seem as though it sounds much nicer to say: "Hi John, it's so cold outside. Wouldn't you like to learn to put on your jacket by yourself?" The problem with introducing a learning activity by ASKING the client if they want to participate is that IF THE CLIENT SAYS 'NO,' you are left with two not so great options which are:

1) Pressuring the client to learn what they just said they do NOT want to learn: "Come on, John, you'll like it once you learn this" or "Well, that's what we're scheduled to do today so we're doing it... you'll see, it will be fine" What this teaches the client is that you are offering a choice, but it is a PHONY choice. In other words, you ASKED, but they really don't have a choice.

2) "OK, I won't teach you how to put on your jacket if you don't want to." This option means that the client loses the opportunity to learn an important ADL skill. To really get clear on why asking does not work, just imagine that each time I sent you an assignment, I asked you: "do you want to do this learning assignment?" What would you say most of the time? How many of my students would do the required learning assignments if I asked instead of just telling them "here's the required assignment"????

So, I'm NOT going to ask... I'm going to introduce the REQUIRED assignment for this lesson!

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENT: Partializing before teaching and Introducing a learning activity

This assignment has THREE questions at the end for you to answer:

Imagine that you are a helping professional and that you will be teaching a young child, Angelica, how to wash her hands. Angelica has a major developmental disability that makes learning new skills difficult for her. You know that it is important that you partialize this task before working with Angelica, that you introduce the task to Angelica effectively, and teach the steps of handwashing in the same order each time you work with her.

- Partialize the task of handwashing into the steps you will use to teach Angelica this ADL skill.

- Write what you will say to INTRODUCE this learning activity (handwashing) to Angelica.

- IN YOUR OWN WORDS, describe WHY partializing an ADL skill is important.