



Keep It Simple using Behavioural Skills Training

Isabelle Cowan, MASP, L.Psych., BCBA
Director, Autism Learning Partnership

An expression often heard in the world of education is that our learners are our best teachers. One learner who proved this expression to be true for me early on in my career as a school psychologist, was Jillian** (fictional name), a seven-year old girl with autism spectrum disorder. Mrs. Harris**, Jillian's teacher requested support because Jillian most often spoke very quietly when giving responses in class, and this was becoming an important barrier for her participation during activities such as group work, reading, circle time, as well as interaction with her peers. I observed Jillian in class and observed the same behaviour and challenges, and her parents confirmed that this was an issue in other community settings. Determined to assist with this issue, I developed a plan that involved shaping her voice volume gradually. As part of the plan, I broke down the steps to increase her voice volume. The process would involve having her first imitate me when I whispered a word, then continue to imitate me as I gradually increased my volume, and provide positive reinforcement when she would imitate louder and longer utterances, until she would imitate a normal voice volume. When I began working with Jillian on this skill, the session went all too smoothly! While she enjoyed the positive reinforcement for a job well done, it occurred to me that Jillian was already able to speak at a normal volume.

A Simpler Process

The rest of the conversation went something like this:

IC – Jillian, Mrs. Harris** shared with me that it is often difficult to hear you in class. She thinks you have a lot of good ideas and would love to hear them, but she can't hear you. When you're in class and your teacher asks you a question, you need to speak loud enough so that she can hear you ([Explain expectation and rationale](#)). Do you know what I mean? (30 seconds)

Jillian: (nods yes).

IC: Watch me. ([Modeling](#)). Mrs. Little (another teacher who was nearby and volunteered to help) will pretend to be Mrs. Harris and I will pretend to be you. Your job is to watch and tell me if I am being loud enough or not loud enough. Okay? (Mrs. Little asked me to read aloud. I read the book at a normal volume, and asked Jillian if it was loud enough. I read aloud with a normal volume on a few occasions, as well as too quietly.

Jillian: (Jillian could identify when I spoke with a normal voice or too quietly. I provided lots of praise and reinforcement when she gave the right answer). (5 minutes)

IC: Okay, Jillian, now it's your turn! ([Practice in role-play situation](#)) Let's pretend you are in class, and I am going to ask you a question. Show me again how you can speak in a nice loud voice so that the teacher and your friends can hear you.

Jillian: (Jillian answered questions with enough volume to be clearly heard. When she was too quiet, I would gesture for her to speak louder. Again, I used lots of reinforcement for clear responses). ([feedback](#)) (5 minutes).

IC: Jillian, you're doing so well! What do you say we go show Mrs. Harris how well you can do this? She is going to be so happy! When you speak loud enough in class, I am going to draw a smiley face on this sheet.

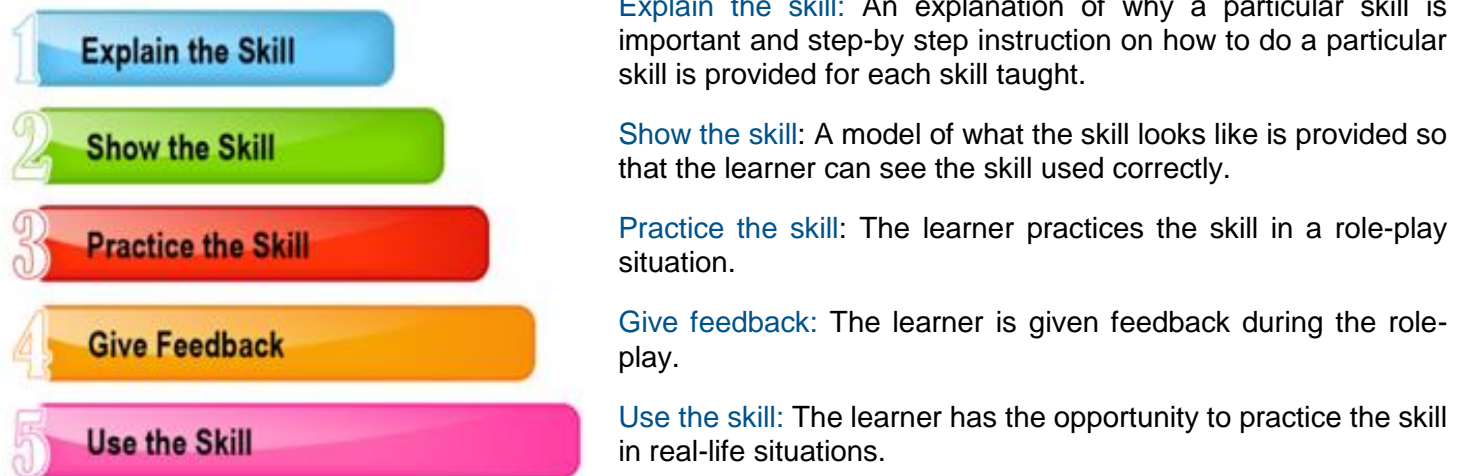
Let's see how many smiley faces you can get, then there will be a surprise.

Jillian: Okay! (smiling)

We then went to the classroom, and I briefly explained to Mrs. Harris what we were working on. With some prompting and reminders, Jillian practiced speaking clearly and loudly enough to be heard ([use the skill in the natural environment](#)). She was still not as loud as when we worked one on one, but it was a significant improvement (15 minutes). Altogether, this initial intervention lasted no longer than 30 minutes, significantly less time than what I had originally planned.

Behavioural Skills Training

This strategy is an evidence-based intervention for teaching skills that has been entitled *Behavioural Skills Training (BST)*.



While this strategy is straightforward, there are key skills the learner must demonstrate for BST to be effective. The learner must be able to:

- have the pre-requisite skills to perform or learn the skill
- understand and attend to instruction
- pay attention to the mode;
- imitate a person's action
- be sufficiently motivated to perform the skill (or create a situation for the learner to be)

The adult responsible for the intervention should consider the following:

- break down and clearly define the steps you want the learner to demonstrate
- adapt your level of language and complexity of the model to the learner's ability to comprehend
- provide a model of what typical learners his/her age say and do
- allow the learner to practice the skill in a safe environment
- practice newly learned skills several times and end on a positive note
- provide ample and descriptive praise for correct demonstration of the skill
- do not assume that because a learner performs a skill accurately during rehearsal or in a role-play situation that he or she will use the skill accurately and fluently in real-life situations.

Finally, get everyone on board (parents, other members of the team) to help the learner practice the skill throughout the day in various situations. Of course, don't forget to keep data and to celebrate the learner's success.