



TAGteach and Children with Special Needs

By Victoria Fogel, BCABA

TAGteach™ (Teaching with Acoustical Guidance) is a new way of teaching using positive reinforcement with a click sound marker to identify successful performance. In past columns we have talked about the tag point—the exact response, action, or position that a teacher pinpoints with a tag (the click sound) to tell the student “YES, that was right!”, how to incorporate tangible rewards and how to harness the power of peer tagging. This month we have a guest author, Victoria Fogel, a behavior analyst who has used TAGteach to teach children diagnosed with autism.

Working with children diagnosed with autism can pose very difficult challenges. These challenges range from trying to decrease severe behavioral problems to teaching a child how to communicate their basic wants and needs. A child appropriately communicating what they want for the first time or hanging up their backpack after several weeks or months is a huge success for that child. For some of these children, these successes do not occur often and it may require months and years of training to learn to walk a short distance independently, dress themselves, identify the people who take care of them, and communicate their wants and needs. As a behavior analyst, teacher, and trainer I am always troubleshooting to find ways to accelerate the learner's acquisition rate. TAGteaching is a way to accelerate the learning process while simultaneously creating a safe, positive environment conducive to learning.

TAGteach is an effective teaching technology that uses an acoustical sound to mark when a desired behavior/skill occurs. The acoustical sound indicates to the learner that they performed the behavior/skill correctly. Positive reinforcement is the foundation of TAG methodology; focusing on the behavior you want to increase and then reinforcing that behavior. This creates a safe environment for the learner, which in turn provides motivation to learn. This is extremely important when working with children diagnosed with autism because often they lose motivation to continue with a teaching session after a couple of trials. If error corrections are given frequently and the sessions are not run at a rapid rate, the learner will quickly lose motivation.

Traditionally we have used error corrections to extinguish the incorrect behavior/skill and teach the correct behavior/skill, but error corrections often appear to have the effect of punishment. TAG does not punish the child's attempt to learn a new behavior/skill. Instead, the method reinforces the child's attempt by setting the stage for success. For example, we used TAG with a child having difficulty focusing on vocalizing while counting. The tag point was “say the number aloud” while he was dropping tokens into a cup, up to a specified number. Each time he said a number, he received a tag. This encouraged him to say the next number and allowed him a small success at each step. Children with special needs



in learning benefit from this high rate of reinforcement along with clear and simple directions.

I have implemented TAGteach with children diagnosed with autism and have experienced wonderful results. Teaching sessions are conducted at a faster pace, children learn at an accelerated rate, and I am able to fine-tune my teaching skills. Students appear to enjoy the teaching sessions. When I asked one student why he liked TAG he said, "Because I win!"

TAGteach can rapidly and dramatically increase the learning acquisition rate. One of my students had considerable difficulty walking from her bus to her classroom door, and required intense prompting to walk this path. She had worked on this task for two years. I began TAGteaching with this student, simply tagging her for each correctly placed foot. After 23 TAG sessions, she was able to walk independently from her bus to the classroom door. Two years of effort using conventional methods could not begin to compare to what we accomplished in less than a month with TAGteach.

This is a precise teaching method that focuses on what the child is doing right, empowers the teacher, and provides motivation to learn. TAG is a beneficial teaching methodology that can aid in the treatment of autism and facilitate a positive, productive learning environment. Parents of children with special learning needs can apply the techniques we have developed for use with autism. In applying the principles of TAGteach (described in previous columns) to children with special needs, the teacher must be sure to break the task into readily achievable pieces, start with something the child can already do, keep the rate of reinforcement very high, and avoid corrections that the child may find aversive.

In May 2006, TAGteach International is presenting a seminar in Florida, specifically directed toward special needs teachers. Please visit www.tagteach.com for details.

Next month we'll talk about the versatility of TAGteach and how you can seamlessly incorporate tagging into existing lesson plans, without changing the technical content of your teaching.

We invite you to join the TAGteacher discussion group at www.tagteach.com to meet others who are implementing TAGteach in various disciplines and to see the list of upcoming TAGteach seminars.

Victoria Fogel is a certified TAG teacher. She is also a board-certified associate behavior analyst at the University of Florida. Victoria currently works with the foster care system to assist in reducing placement disruption. Before moving to Florida, she worked as a behavior analyst and teacher in California at an independent



school for children diagnosed with autism. Victoria resides in Titusville, Florida, with her husband Jon and neurotic dog Conor.