

Activity-Based Intervention in the Home

Home-based SEIT teaching is a new way of working for most teachers. The majority of men and women who make teaching a career do so with the notion that they will be working in the classroom arena. Many who find they are traveling to see children at home have had no specific training or experience in making instructional plans that integrate the home as the setting for teaching skills. Typically, teachers working in a child's home look for a "space" in which they can conduct their instructional activities. These activities usually require the teacher to bring materials designed for a specific learning purpose, i.e. sequence story cards, puzzles, pictures, cube blocks, etc. The child's responses during the activity are based on the teacher's directions, prompts or cues. Working in this way may be the visiting teacher's attempt to make the environment more "instructional" and thus create a comfortable and familiar setting out of the home.

However, when working in this way, teachers are missing wonderful opportunities to take advantage of the home environment; to teach skills that children need in the context in which they are needed – the daily routines and activities that occur naturally every day in the home.

Activity-based Intervention¹ or "ABI" is an approach that is designed to capitalize on the naturally occurring learning opportunities inherent in children's activities. ABI has been adapted by many teachers and quality early childhood programs as the primary means of teaching young children in the classroom. However, ABI was also conceived as a way of utilizing the many opportunities for learning that occur as part of a child's daily life in the home.

What exactly is ABI?

Bricker, et al., define activities-based intervention as a methodology "...*designed to take advantage...of the various aspects of daily transactions that occur between most parents and adults and their infants and young children. ABI is a child-directed...approach that embeds children's individual goals and objectives in routine, planned or child-initiated activities and uses logically occurring antecedents and consequences to develop functional and generative skills.*"²

Within this approach, great attention is given to the child's interests and actions by encouraging and supporting children in activities that they naturally find motivating and appealing. The adult joins the child in the activity of interest, exploiting the activity for the naturally occurring learning opportunities that are inherent or become available as the activity unfolds.

¹ Bricker and Cripe, An Activity Based Approach to Early Intervention, 1992

² Bricker, Pretti-Frontczak and McCormas, An Activity-Based Approach to Early Intervention, 2nd Edition, 1998, pg.11

Bricker et al. identify four (4) major elements of ABI:

- **Child-initiated transactions:** Rather than the teacher selecting the activity and directing it in specific ways, the child is encouraged to initiate activities. The adult joins in and follows the child's lead, seeking to capitalize on learning opportunities that develop. The adult may also guide and/or expand on the child's actions, developing the activity and modifying it for instructional purposes. The basis of the transaction is that when the child initiates actions, people (adults and peers) and the environment (as for example with a toy) will respond in some way³.

This does not mean, however, that the adult must always do just as the child wants. ABI also uses *planned activities* and *routine activities*. Planned activities are designed by the teacher or adult. However, in the ABI approach, the teacher-planned activities are always *based on the child's interests* and use the child's *actions* rather than designed to promote a specific response to a set of predetermined cues. For example, if the goal is to have the child learn the labels for articles of clothing, the teacher might make available activities that the child would find appealing, such as "dress up" play, dressing for an outdoor activity or playing with dolls, rather than having the child sit at a table and name clothing items presented in picture cards.

Routine activities are those events that occur on a predictable or scheduled basis, whether at home, such as meals, dressing, bathing, etc., or in school, for example, snack time, clean-up, morning songs, etc.

- **Embedding Goals and Objectives:** The child's IEP goals and objectives would be *embedded* or included as an integral part of the activity. As in the example above, an activity would be designed to appeal to the interests of a child and then the goal of increasing vocabulary would be the focus of the learning opportunity the activity generated. The same goal might be embedded in the morning routine of getting dressed, where the names of clothing items would be stressed.
- **Logically Occurring Antecedents and Consequences:** Child-initiated, planned and routine activities should involve antecedents that occur logically before the action or event. The consequences of the action or event must be integral and give meaning and feedback. For example, if the goal was to have a child initiate verbalization, a logically occurring antecedent might be the availability of several toys on a shelf to choose from. When the child indicated verbal choice of an item, the consequence would be obtaining the requested item. Richley and Wheeler give the

³ Richley, D. and Wheeler, J. Inclusive Early Childhood Education, 2000, pg. 105

example of a child who needs to work on wrist rotation and who loves water play. The child would be given the opportunity to play with water. The adult would also provide a scoop and cup and guide the child in using these items with the increased wrist rotation that would allow for scooping and pouring the water out. The antecedent to the child's using increased wrist rotation would be that she was brought to play with water and provided materials that would encourage increased wrist movement. The naturally occurring consequence would be the child's delight in watching the water pour out and splash.

- **Focus on Functional and Generative Skills:** goals and objectives for young children should have practicality and usefulness in their daily lives. The skills they are taught should be useful to them in a variety of settings. Bricker and Cripe describe functional skills as those "that permit children to negotiate their physical and social environment in an independent and satisfying manner..." For example, it is more useful to work on balance by getting in and out of a chair than to balance on a therapy ball or walk across a balance beam. A child who learns to get in and out of a chair needs that skill at home, in school and in a variety of community settings, thus the learning would be generalized naturally.

The Benefits of ABI:

To illustrate the benefits of using the ABI approach, consider the following two scenarios:

Eileen, Jorge's home-based SEIT teacher has come to his house this morning with a plan to help Jorge increase his receptive/expressive vocabulary as stipulated on his IEP. She has been working on vocabulary through a "unit" approach and today's plan calls for Jorge to learn the words for household objects. She has brought a Lotto game that has boards and cards for bath items, and kitchen utensils and "food" related items. She introduces the "bath" and "kitchen" board and holds up each of the corresponding cards, naming all of the items. Jorge listens to her naming each item and repeats each label as requested. He grabs at some of the other boards and cards but Eileen lets him know that "we're not playing with those right now". Eileen hands one card at a time to Jorge and then asks him "what is this?" while having him match the card to the appropriate board. Jorge is able to name a few on his own and matches some of the cards to the appropriate items pictured on the board. Pretty soon, his attention begins to wander and he again attempts to grab at and look at other cards in the game box. When Eileen tries to stop him, he begins flipping the cards he has grabbed. At the end of the session, Eileen lends the Lotto game to Jorge's mother and asks her to spend "at least 10 minutes every day" with it.

Kristen, Damika's teacher, is also working on words for household items and associated events. Today she has brought some play food and utensils in the

hopes of engaging Damika in a pretend picnic where she plans to focus on the names for cups, plates, napkin, spoon, fork and other items. Upon arriving at the house, Damika is playing with her doll. Kristen sets out some of the plastic food, naming each item. Damika does not seem particularly interested beyond bringing some of the food toys up to her own mouth. Pretty soon, she is attending to her doll, pulling the doll's dress off and putting it back on. Kristen decides to join in, describing Damika's play. "You're taking the dress off. Ooo, pretty dress! You want her shoes off, too. OK." Damika stares at her doll. Kristen looks and says "oh, a dirty spot" pointing to smudge spots on the dolls feet. Damika smiles in response. Kristen reaches over and pretends to wash the doll. Damika's smile grows wider and she pretends to wash the doll, too. Very soon, Kristen and Damika have moved to the sink. With help from Damika's mother, Kristen has obtained a washcloth, soap, powder, towel and shampoo. During the course of their activity, Kristen has been able to talk about these items, as well as the sink, water, stopper. She also models the concepts of more, clean, dirty, dry, wet, gone. They "play" together, Damika leading the way and Kristen guiding and expanding on Damika's actions with the doll. Damika has imitated the 8 words modeled and has used 2-3 word phases such as "want 'e' towel" "more shampoo", "no stopper", "baby soap". Afterwards, Kristen notes in her log that Damika has begun to imitate nouns and verbs associated with bath time and has used 5 vocabulary items in phrases spontaneously. She plans to repeat the activity on the next visit, to reinforce the vocabulary introduced this day. She will also prompt Damika to remember what was needed for the activity, having her help gather the necessary items. Additionally, she will bring a toy brush and comb and some rubber bands and ribbons for the doll's hair to expand the activity. Damika's mother will be encouraged to join in so that Kristen has an opportunity to help her model the same language to Damika and encourage her use of words and phrases during Damika's own bath time.

The second scenario depicted here highlights many of the benefits of using an activities-based approach. Kristen had let Damika initiate the activity and lead it while expanding it and embedding her goals within it. She had capitalized on the opportunities for learning that were inherent in Damika's play. No artificial inducements or reinforcers were needed to keep Damika's attention and participation; Damika was self-motivated and having fun. The activity allowed much spontaneous social exchange between the interventionist and the child and afforded many naturally-occurring antecedents and consequences to Damika's use of language. The goals of having Damika understand and use household-related vocabulary were met and would continue. These words would certainly be useful in other contexts, such as real bath time or washing up; no artificially-structured "carry-over" activities needed to be done by the parent. The interactions modeled could be copied by the mother and used during bathing routines that would occur throughout the week, affording Damika lots of opportunities to practice her new words.

In summary, the benefits of ABI include:

- The focus on meaningful skills learned in the context in which they are needed;
- Increased attention and motivation; less reliance on artificial inducements or rewards;
- Incidental learning opportunities, such as for social and interaction skills;
- Less need for structured lessons for “generalization”;
- Increased opportunities for practice of skills across contexts and with other people beyond the interventionist;
- Less need for “specialized” materials or equipment;
- Increased ability for caregivers to work on targeted skills during naturally-occurring routines and events, with objects and materials readily available, thus increasing caregiver participation and ownership of the educational program for their child.

Initiating ABI in the Home:

For those who have been used to directing all aspects of instructional activities, making the change to an activities-based approach may take some time and adjustment. To help get started, we suggest the following steps:

- Begin to develop a dynamic and creative interactive style with children; trust the child as a learner and allow events to unfold;
- Write developmentally appropriate IEPs goals and objectives that are **functional and useful** to the daily routines and activities of the child in the home and community. As mentioned, skills that are only useful in one place or with an “expert” using a specialized piece of equipment or used as a response to specific educational materials limits the meaningfulness of the skill and creates a need to “generalize” it to other contexts;
- Take time to observe the child to determine his/her interests (outside as well as in the house);
- Identify, with the parent and/or significant caregivers, the daily events of the child’s life, both the routines, such as mealtimes, bathing, or going to bed and other activities that occur, i.e. playing with neighborhood children, going to the park, the supermarket, grandparents’ home, participation in religious and cultural activities, etc.;
- Take into consideration each of the child’s routines, daily activities and frequent events to determine what goals/objectives could be embedded; target skills that can be practiced in events or activities that provide naturally occurring antecedents and consequences;
- Design activities for scheduled intervention time that give the child the opportunity to take the lead and practice targeted skills in a meaningful and inherently motivating context;
- Identify the adaptations and modifications to a routine or activity based on the child’s specific learning needs;

- Arrange the learning environment and materials in ways that will encourage the practice of targeted skills.

Final Note on ABI:

The appeal of the ABI approach is growing nationally and being put into practice in homes, nursery schools, special education programs and inclusion settings. This exciting approach can be implemented without specific coursework or training certificates. All it takes is an understanding of the underlying principles, a willingness to trust the learner, openness to the opportunities available for learning in the environment and the imagination to utilize the child and the child's everyday world as the instructional framework.

For more information about ABI and its application to individual and group settings the reader is referred to the bibliography at this site and the following web sites:

The National Association for the Education of Young Children at www.naeyc.org

The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children at www.dec-sped.org

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center at www.nectac.org

Other resources:

Bricker, D., Woods Cripe, J.J., (1992) *An Activities-Based Approach to Early Intervention*. Baltimore: University Park Press.

Bricker, D., Pretty-Frontczak, K., McComas, N. (1998) *An Activities-Based Approach to Early Intervention, 2nd Edition*, Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.

Richley D., Wheeler, J. (2000) *Inclusive Early Childhood Education*, Albany: Delmar Publishers.