

# Meaningful Community Participation for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Chelsea Maher MA, Lauriann King, MA; Debra Sugar, MSW, LICSW  
Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Programs Division

Participating in the community is an element of every day life, however, this can present unique challenges for families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Community participation for children with ASD is very important both for the family and for the children in order to:

- Gain new experiences
- Interact with different people and environments
- Have the opportunity to generalize current skills
- Participate in daily living activities



## ***Community Experiences as Learning Experiences***

Meaningful community participation for young children with ASD is more than teaching children to simply *tolerate* the outing, but creating an *opportunity to learn* and build a foundation for future skills.

### ***Who Can Help in Making Community Participation a Learning Experience?***

- Parents & family members
- Service Providers
- Educators
- Friends
- Community Members
- Peers

## **Making a Plan for Meaningful Community Participation**

This document will be best utilized in conjunction with the webinar, Community Participation for Young Children with ASD. The free webinar training can be found at <http://cdd.unm.edu/autism/programs/autismwebinar.html>

Preparing for community participation and outings is the most important step to help make a child successful in the community setting!

Through evidence based practices, such as focusing on *antecedent based interventions* and *positive reinforcement*, family members and professionals can take steps to make participating in the community a meaningful and educational experience for all.

### **What is an Antecedent Based Intervention?**

In the most basic terms, an *antecedent based intervention* is teaching a skill or intervening before a problem behavior occurs.

Antecedent interventions are crucial to successful and meaningful community participation, so that we teach skills and prepare children for change *before* they are actually in the situation. This is how we set children up for success!

### **What is Positive Reinforcement?**

In the most basic terms, *positive reinforcement* is adding something (such as a desired item or activity) to increase the likelihood that a behavior will occur again. An example would be giving a child a treat for picking up toys.

# Steps for Making a Plan for Meaningful Community Participation

The following steps to make a plan for meaningful community participation provide a very helpful and successful framework for families and professionals to follow. Remember, these steps are an antecedent based intervention, and are to be gone through and taught to children before participating in the community setting. These steps are a great place to start when teaching children with autism to successfully participate in their communities, and they are also useful for children who are currently successful in some community settings, but need further teaching for others.

More information on how to execute these steps can be found in the Community Participation for Young Children with ASD webinar <http://www.cdd.unm.edu/autism/programs/autismwebinar.html>

## Step 1: List and Rank

- List the community locations you want the child to participate in (such as grocery store, library, grandma's house)

*Example: Library, grocery store, Grandma's house*

- Second, rank the items on your list in the order of priority for the family

*Example:*

1. Grocery Store
2. Grandma's house
3. Library



## Step 2: Identify Barriers

- For each item on your list, go through and think about the barriers, or the things that make that setting difficult for the child, or what skills the child needs to improve participation in these settings. Write the barrier-needed skills down.
- Be very specific in this step!

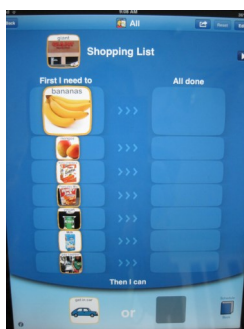
*Example: Grocery store barriers*

- Grabbing items from shelves
- Running away from parent

## Step 3: Prepare and Practice

- In this step, we prepare the child for the community setting by practicing the skills we want them to perform in that setting!
- Match an intervention, or a skill to teach, with each barrier listed in step 2.
- Once an intervention is selected, begin teaching this skill to the child with the addition of positive reinforcement.

*Example: Teach the child to use a visual shopping list in order to learn to only grab appropriate or needed items from the grocery shelf. Teach the use of this list at home with common items and reinforce the child for using the pictures on the list to match it to the corresponding object.*



Choiceworks App



## Step 4: Do and Reinforce

Final step in the process!

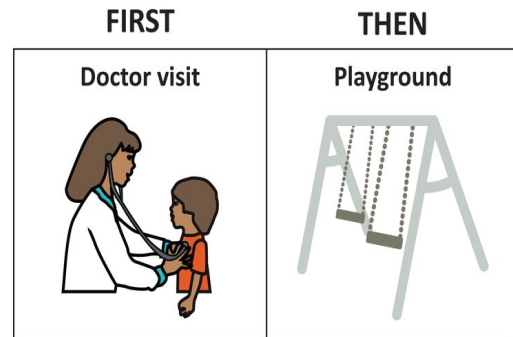
- Go into the community setting and "do" the skill that the child has been practicing at home.
- Be sure to reinforce the child for performing or attempting the new skill
- Don't wait to take the child to the community setting until the skill is fully mastered at home
- Go to the community setting in off-peak hours (a grocery store in the morning or a restaurant between lunch and dinner).
- Initially, go with the sole purpose of letting the child practice the new skill (i.e., don't go to the grocery store to practice skills when you need to buy lots of groceries!)
- Come prepared with things you know the child likes (reinforcers).
- Be prepared to leave after a short amount of time- leave on a positive note!

## Generalizing Current Skills in the Community Setting

Not all teaching experiences in the community setting need to focus on new skills. We can also use community participation as an opportunity for children to generalize current skills and strengths. Generalizing a skill means to engage in a skill in a different place, with different people, and/or with different objects.

### To generalize current strengths:

1. List current skills or strengths
2. List community places these skills or strengths could be practiced, or generalized
3. Use visual supports such as a schedule or first-then board.
4. Reinforce the child for engaging in the skill!



### Resources:

- Community Participation for Young Children with ASD webinar: <http://www.cdd.unm.edu/autism/programs/autismwebinar.html>
- Tips on Grocery Store Outings <http://www.lovaas.com/blog/archives/19-Incorporating-Learning-at-the-Grocery-Store.html>
- Real Look Autism– “Shopping Therapy” Video <http://www.reallookautism.com/2011/08/grocery-store-outing/>
- ChoiceWorks App– Create interactive visual schedules, to do lists, and shopping lists <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/choiceworks/id486210964?mt=8>
- *The Child With Autism Goes to Town* by Kathy Labosh *A very helpful book with ideas and suggestions for success with a child with ASD in nearly every type of community setting*
- UNM CDD Parent Home Training <https://www.cdd.unm.edu/autism/programs/parenttraining.html>
- Family and Provider Resources at the CDD: A state-wide information line for families, Individuals with ASD, and providers seeking autism specific resources 505-272-1852 or Toll Free at 1-800-270-1861

### About the Author (s):

**Chelsea Maher, Lauriann King and Debra Sugar** work at the University of New Mexico, Center for Development and Disability, Autism Programs.

---

For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Autism Programs call  
**(505) 272-1852 or 1-800-270-1861** [www.cdd.unm.edu/autism](http://www.cdd.unm.edu/autism)

---

