

UNM CDD/NMPED Educator Voices Podcast Classroom Essentials – Preference Assessments

“Preference assessments are observations or trial-based evaluations that allow practitioners to determine a preference hierarchy. A preference hierarchy indicates which items are an individual’s highly preferred items, moderately preferred items, and low preferred items. Sometimes (but not always), the most preferred items can be used to reinforce appropriate behaviors. Preference assessments can be used to determine hierarchies for toys, edible items, social interactions, activities, caregivers, locations, etc.” (<https://ebip.vkcsites.org/preference-assessments>) This is a very helpful website if you’d like more information on preference assessments and how to conduct structured formalized assessments.

In the podcast, we talked exclusively about preference assessment. It’s important to know that there are both preference and reinforcement assessments. What’s different is in what they measure. **Preference assessments** measure the learner’s **interest** in objects or activities and are used to identify **potential** reinforcers. **Reinforcer assessments** measure the **effects** of using those items or activities as reinforcers. In other words, in order to know that a preference is actually a reinforcer, you would need to measure whether or not a specific item/activity actually does increase the likelihood that a specific behavior will happen again. You may not perform reinforcement assessments, however, it is important to know the difference. This website provides excellent information on how to perform a variety of preference assessments as well as reinforcer assessments. (<https://masteraba.com/reinforcer-preference-assessment>)

Assessing preferences early and often will increase your ability to teach what needs to be taught and will ultimately save a lot of time and frustration! There are several ways to go about it and using several methods will provide information about lots of possible reinforcers.

- ✓ Start off by interviewing students if that’s a possibility. If not, talk with families – including siblings, other caregivers and staff members or school personnel who have worked with the student in the past. Here is a link to an interview that is helpful when working with students who have more significant disabilities.
<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/DDA/dda/documents>
- ✓ Another helpful website is <https://theautismhelper.com/preference-assessments-pairing/> It discusses a number of methods that can be used to assess preferences
- ✓ **Watch** and collect data! What are your students drawn to in the classroom, on the playground, in the library, etc. As mentioned in the podcast, don’t depend on the items that typically developing students are most motivated by. Also – to the greatest extent possible, make sure that items and activities are age appropriate – not primarily intended for very young children if you are working with older students.

- ✓ When you have collected this information, you are in a position to use one of the methods described on the websites above to make a more careful determination of preferences and priorities.
- ✓ Don't discount some of the unusual interests your students may have. Is there a way that you can structure opportunities to engage in some of them to provide reinforcement? (I have had experiences with students who liked to shred paper, pull strings out of fabrics, use crayons and markers in different ways, watch just the credits of a movie or TV show, watch a 30 second clip of a cartoon or TV show). Be aware that this requires **caution** as some students may become so focused on these restricted, repetitive interests that they are unable to engage in other learning activities.
- ✓ While using food reinforcers can be very helpful (if a student is hungry enough to be motivated by food) it is best to be cautious. It is very easy to overuse food reinforcers – using too much, using the same things over and over, depending on foods that are not particularly healthy for students who have limited diets, etc. That said, some students will start off being most motivated by food. When that is the case, it is very important to begin to “pair” the food with other reinforcers. Also – use as little as possible. Don't forget drinks and listen to the families regarding unusual food preferences and/or ways that the food is presented.