

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

Christine Reeve: I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education but my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. Hello, I'm Christine Reeve. I'm delighted that you're joining me today because I am super pumped to be talking about ABA instruction. We have talked about some of the things ABA is and is not, along with some of the controversy around it in Episode 117. Last week, I talked about strategies to help you implement more naturalistic instruction effectively in your classroom. This week, I'm going to take a slightly different tack and talk about how you might actually be sabotaging your instruction in the classroom. Yep, we've all done that at some point or another. This isn't something that I'm calling anyone out on. These are things that we seriously have all done in our instruction at one point or another.

Our students, especially our students with autism, are so attuned to the elements of their environment. In fact, that's part of their struggle sometimes in knowing how to screen out the things that aren't really relevant and focus on those that are. That characteristic that we call stimulus over selectivity to get technical is one of the reasons why it's pretty easy at times to sabotage our instructional efforts without even realizing it. We might be teaching the wrong thing, we might be thinking he's making progress when he isn't, or we might be teaching something in a way that he only responds to in certain characteristics or certain situations and they may not be ones that are really relevant for this student.

These aren't indications that you aren't a good teacher because trust me, we all have had this happen to us. They are remarkably easy to do and they often happen without us realizing it until someone watches us, and points it out. But it's important because if we're aware of them, we can try to prevent them from becoming patterns that can lead to our students making patterns in their learning that then take us longer to fix.

If you're looking for tips and tools that can help make your classroom work go smoother, and more efficiently, like some of the ones I offer in the podcast, come check out the Special Educator Academy. We have tons of tools and tips to help you, help your students from workshops and training to tips and templates. There is a private podcast you can listen to on the go, all of which are designed to help make your life as a teacher or an educator easier. You can grab a 7-day free trial at specialeducatoracademy.com and come join us for our weekly office hours with me every Sunday evening. They are recorded if Sunday evenings aren't good for you where we talk about a topic and we share questions, and ideas. Now, let's get started.

The great thing about all seven of these ways that you might be sabotaging your instruction is that they're all pretty easy to fix and they're all things that someone can often catch or you can catch, just knowing that it might be an issue. In addition to telling you about them, I'll try and also share how to determine if this is something that might be happening in your instruction. The first

one is what I call your smile gives you away. One of the most common and subtle things that give away an answer is when you put two items out, and you want a student to point to something. You're usually looking for a motor response with this or you're putting something down and he's getting closer to the answer, and you smile when his hand goes near the right answer or he starts saying the right answer.

We smile because we want them to get things right. We smile because we get reinforced by the learner getting the answer right. That's a good thing but if you realize that your student is holding out his hand between the two picture cards, then looking at your face, chances are he's looking for that smile. He's looking to see what your face tells him, whether or not he's giving you the right answer. That's something that you want to look for. Along those same lines, the second one is that your frown lets you down. When the student reaches for the wrong answer, you frown or you wince or you make some face that shows you're not happy with that answer. It's pretty much the same as the smile but when you're invested in the student being successful, it is really hard to keep your face neutral when you see a problem but that frown also lets him know that he's about to get the wrong answer and he switches. If you see him switching his answer at the last minute, ask yourself whether or not you did something that might have affected that.

Next up, your hand is in the wrong or the right place. You put out picture cards for example, but you leave your hand closer to the one that you expect him to hand you or you put out materials and you leave your hand by the last one that you put down, which may or may not be the right answer and the student always chooses the one that your hand is closest to. Sometimes, that's because your hand is closer to the right answer, so he's learned, "Her hand tells me the answer," or that he's just using that as a cue instead of looking at the picture. That's a pretty good sign that the student is paying attention to your hands and not the pictures or the materials that you want him to attend to. Are you reading a book and pointing to the words, and you leave your finger under the word that you want him to point to? Same issue.

Instead, you want to put out the cards or read the passage or whatever the type of instruction is and remove your hands from the situation. I try to fold them in front of me or put them under the table. This is one that sometimes requires someone else to notice it because it's really pretty subtle but if you watch yourself for it, you are likely to catch it before it becomes a long-term habit.

Next up, you're giving verbal choices and when you give the right answer, your voice changes pitch. For instance, you present a picture of a cow and you say, "Is this a picture of a cow?" and you say, "Cow," your voice goes up. When you show a picture of a cow and you say, "Is this a dog?" your voice pitch goes down like that. If I said, "Is this a cow?" you'd probably think, "Yeah, it probably is." If I say, "Is this a cow?" my whole voice tone tells you. Now, I grant you that often, these children are not picking up voice tone in their social skills but this is the time that they will pick it up. This happens to all of us. In fact, this happens to many of us who do ABA instruction. It's so common that Mary Jane Weiss, who's a researcher in the field, once referred to a similar version of this as SD voice. In ABA, the SD is a discriminative stimulus. It's a particular type of instruction in discrete trials. She is absolutely right. We find ourselves saying things like, "Is this

a cow?" or "Show me this, show me this, show me this." We say the same thing and we sound the same way, which is not the way normal people talk.

If we aren't careful, we all end up sounding just like that. It's not good for generalization. Listen to yourself when you give instructions. Does it sound natural? Are you giving cues away with your voice tone? Do others think that you sound natural? Are you making the pitch go up or down based on what the right answer is?

Another one is pretty obvious but we all do it at some point or another, which is like where your hands are, you put the picture or word card down and you always put the right one in the middle or you always put the right one on the left side, so the student learns to just choose the one on the left, not the correct answer. We always need to make sure that we're moving our materials around as we're doing instruction, that we're not always putting them down in the exact same place.

Number six, your order of instructions is giving you away. You tell a student to stand up, then you tell him to sit down immediately after that. You never tell him to sit down when say, he's doing something else. He's standing up at a table doing a puzzle and you never say, "Jimmy, sit down." You always say, "Okay, Jimmy, stand up," and he stands up, "Okay, Jimmy, sit down." I always say, "Stand up, stand up," and there's that SD voice. The student learns to pay attention to the order of the instructions rather than what the actual instruction is. That one can be hard because obviously, you have to make sure that your instructions are given in ways that are functional. You're not going to tell him to sit down if he's already sitting but that means that sometimes, it's too easy to get into a pattern that we don't realize that we're doing.

Sometimes, it's really helpful, if you're doing something like giving instructions, to make a list of the order of the instructions you want to give so that they get switched up every day or the order, the items that you're teaching or the pages that you're reading on a post-it note so that you specifically are not ordering them in a way that gives their meaning away.

Finally, number seven is you look at the right answer. This is probably the most subtle of all of them because again, it is amazing how the same kid who can't discriminate between two animals can tell which card your eye is focused on. This is the same kid who doesn't look at you when you call his name or make eye contact with you. One of the things about autism in particular that is really fascinating is that they are picking up on cues in the environment that most of the rest of us are completely missing. Often, they see the details and they don't see the big picture because they're focused on the details.

A good way to prevent this particular error that you're looking at the right answer is if he's looking at your face and not looking at the materials when he gives you an answer, chances are good that he's getting the information that he needs from your face, not from the learning activity materials. Those are some of the things to be careful of to assure that you're teaching what you mean to be teaching. This is critical because if the student is attending to the wrong part of our instruction, we're not only going to have to re-teach that skill, we're going to have to unteach the faulty parts of what we taught. We're going to have to teach them to pay attention to the cards

instead of our facial expressions, for instance. That's a very long complex process for some of our students.

One way to avoid these issues is to run your instructional time as if someone from the class or team is absent. I call it doing the 1-man down plan. I have a post on that, that I will share in the show notes, and that frees somebody up to observe the sessions, and give feedback about whether these things might be happening in the session. Similarly, you could videotape some of your sessions but focus the video on you instead of on the learner. You can learn a lot from watching yourself as painful as I know that can sometimes be.

If you're looking again, at expanding your toolbox of teaching strategies to meet the needs of your diverse learners, definitely come and join us in the Special Educator Academy because we have tons of resources, and training on all these different types of instruction, all different kinds of evidence-based practices for students with autism and other types of disabilities, and you can get a free 7-day trial at specialeducatoracademy.com. I want to thank you so much for joining me today. I hope you'll come back next week for another episode about ABA instructional strategies. Until then, have an amazing and wonderful week.