aba BT'S ESSENTIALS

Pairing: Building Motivation and Trust

When you're new to ABA, one of the most important concepts to understand is pairing. Pairing is the process of building a positive, trusting relationship with your learner so that your presence becomes associated with good things. Before we expect a learner to follow instructions or work on skills, we first want them to feel comfortable, safe, and motivated to be with us.

Think of pairing as the foundation for everything else you'll do.

What Is Pairing?

Pairing means consistently connecting yourself with things the learner enjoys, fun activities, favorite toys, preferred snacks (when appropriate), attention, and positive experiences. When pairing is done well, the learner sees you as someone who brings value and enjoyment, not just demands.

Simple Example:

If every time you enter the room, fun games start, bubbles come out, or the learner gets access to a favorite activity, you become part of what they like. Over time, your presence itself becomes reinforcing.

What Pairing Looks Like in Practice

- Sit near the learner and join what they're already doing
- Offer preferred toys or activities
- Imitate their play
- Keep your tone warm and relaxed
- Limit demands at first
- Follow their lead
- Deliver lots of behavior-specific praise ("I love how you built that tower!")

What Pairing Does Not Look Like

- Giving many instructions right away
- Taking control of all materials immediately
- Correcting every small behavior at the start
- Removing preferred items too quickly
- Acting only as an instructor instead of a play partner

The 80/20 Guideline (Beginner Friendly Rule of Thumb)

Especially at the beginning:

- About 80% positive interaction and fun
- About 20% light, easy demands
- This helps prevent escape or avoidance behaviors early on.

How Do You Know Pairing Is Working?

You may see:

- The learner approaches you
- They smile or show positive affect when you arrive
- They accept items from you
- They stay near you
- Problem behavior decreases when you engage
- They respond more willingly to simple instructions

Pairing Changes Over Time

At the start of services, or when you are newly assigned to a learner, much of the session may focus on pairing. As rapport and motivation grow, you will gradually fade the amount of time spent purely on

pairing and increase time spent on teaching goals and running programs.

However, pairing never fully stops. Every session should still begin with brief pairing to re-establish motivation and connection before placing demands. Even experienced learners benefit from a few minutes of positive interaction first.

If You're Struggling to Connect

Not every pairing strategy works for every learner, and that's okay. If you're having difficulty engaging your learner or finding what motivates them, reach out to your BCBA. They can help identify strong reinforcers, suggest pairing strategies, and model how to build better engagement.

Quick Session Example

First 10–15 minutes of session:

- Offer choices of activities
- Play alongside the learner
- Give praise and attention
- Add only very easy requests if appropriate ("high five," "give me the ball")
- Immediately return to fun

Remember:

Instruction works best after rapport is built. Pairing is not extra, it is essential. Strong pairing leads to better cooperation, faster learning, and a more positive experience for both you and the learner.

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