

DTT vs. NET: Understanding the Differences in ABA Therapy

QUICK GUIDE FOR BCBAS

What's the Difference?

Both Discrete Trial Training (DTT) and Natural Environment Training (NET) are valuable teaching strategies in ABA therapy, but they differ in structure, setting, and approach.

Discrete Trial Training (DTT)

- Highly structured – skills are broken down into small, isolated steps.
- Taught in a controlled setting (e.g., therapy room, quiet space).
- Therapist-led – clear instruction, response, and immediate reinforcement.
- Best for: Learning foundational skills like following commands, identifying objects, and requesting items.

Example: Teaching a child to say “cookie” when shown a picture card. The therapist prompts the response and reinforces it immediately.

Natural Environment Training (NET)

- Taught in real-world settings – school, home, playground, or community.
- More flexible and child-led – learning happens naturally through interests.
- Focuses on generalization – using skills in everyday life.
- Best for: Building social interactions, problem-solving, and self-help skills.

Example: The child wants a snack, so the therapist waits for them to request it naturally (“I want a cookie”) rather than prompting them.

When to Use Each Approach?

DTT works best for structured skill-building (e.g., learning new words, following one-step commands).

NET is ideal for applying those skills in real-life settings (e.g., asking for help in the classroom or playing cooperatively with peers).

Most ABA programs use a combination of both to ensure skills are learned AND generalized!

Have thoughts? Let's discuss how you're using DTT & NET in practice!

For more resources, check our BCBA library or reach out for more information.