

## Module: Pivotal Response Training (PRT)

### CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

#### Leslie, an Elementary Learner in an Inclusive Setting

Leslie is a 10-year-old with ASD who is fully included in a general education classroom. Her parents and teacher both report that Leslie class and homework assignments are filled with protests, whining, crying, avoidance, destroying materials, and high levels of frustration. Tasks are often left incomplete due to the extreme level of stress that they cause in the home, in addition to inadequate classroom supports to provide one-on-one assistance.

This made assignment completion an immediate priority for enhancing Leslie's academic development. The first step in implementing the PRT intervention program was to offer Leslie choices at the start of the task. Examples included letting Leslie decide which utensil to write with and which color to use (e.g., markers, pencils, crayons, ballpoint versus sharpie pens), where to complete the assignment (e.g., in kitchen or bedroom at home; which desk in classroom to sit at), which assignment to begin with (e.g., math, spelling, history), what order of problems to follow (e.g., addition before subtraction, third spelling page first), and so forth. Offering these simple choices was a highly effective strategy for physically helping Leslie start the task and stay seated. She was more likely to remain engaged in the assignment simply because she got to choose.

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In addition to offering choices at the start of the task, options were interspersed throughout the assignment to encourage and reinforce Leslie's participation. During a math assignment with addition and subtraction problems, Leslie performed counting and subtracting more consistently when offered the choice of using preferred objects, such as favorite animals or stickers. When it was time to answer reading comprehension questions, Leslie chose whether to write her responses on a blue or pink piece of construction paper. Leslie also selected and cut out favorite pictures from magazines to decorate her assignment. Embedding learner-selected topics within a novel, or less preferred activity, also helped Leslie to maintain her focus during homework time and to develop eagerness to participate.

Further, following her choices provided natural and contingent reinforcement in relation to the assignment, thereby strengthening the association between her behavioral responses and the positive consequences in completing her assignment. For a science worksheet on the solar system, Leslie incorporated topics that were of interest to her, such as the moon and stars, when learning about the different planets and their environments. Her worksheets were modified so that information and questions on preferred topics could be interspersed with the required readings and questions. Making modifications to assignments to reflect the learner's current performance level was a useful strategy for decreasing Leslie's feelings of frustration and aggravation. Other task modifications included reducing the number of problems on a worksheet, providing

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alternative means for recording answers (e.g., dictating, hand-writing, typing, using a label maker, alternating with a peer), or using pictures to represent words/concepts. As Leslie's level of task completion and performance improved, these modifications were gradually removed or lessened to facilitate full participation.

Another strategy for increasing Leslie's cooperation and enjoyment during assignments was reinforcing her attempts. Like all learners, Leslie occasionally made mistakes when working on her assignments. However, it was imperative that she not be penalized for doing so by having her erase and start over, especially when she completed problems on her own. Instead, the adult and Leslie worked together on subsequent problems or questions to address the learning error, and any reasonable efforts at reaching the solution were recognized and reinforced.

In summary, applying these intervention strategies helped Leslie develop confidence and motivation to improve her academic achievement within an inclusive environment. Offering choices, simplifying and modifying tasks, reinforcing attempts, and providing natural and contingent reinforcement are beneficial procedures for motivating learners with autism to make more rapid academic gains.