



## AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST, EPISODE 23 TRAINING PARAS

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode23>

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

Today I'm going to talk about training staff because I know that's a huge issue for many of us with data collection, behavior plans, and pretty much everything. As we all know the days of paraprofessional making copies and filling in for office work are done...and we cannot do the jobs we do in our special education classrooms, or support students in general education classrooms without the help of paraprofessionals.

From surveying when I do training and my experience working in a very wide range of school districts across the US, I know that most paraprofessionals walk into the classroom with very limited training. They might have none. They might have first aid, CPR and maybe your crisis management training. They might have rules and regulations. They might have none. And that means that usually the training is up to you.

Right about now you are probably saying some variation of these two things. "What?? I just started in this job...no one taught me how to train adults!" or "Right...and who has time for that!"

But no worries....I've got you covered. Today I've got a quick review of what we know about best practice in training adults and how to get it done in your classroom.

Let's Get Started

## What's Best Practice in Training Paraprofessionals?



So, let's get started by talking about what the best practices in training paraprofessionals are. If you were one of the folks who responded by saying no one trained you to train paraprofessionals (or any adults)...trust me...you are not alone! Most teacher preparation programs do not talk about managing and training staff as part of their curriculum. It's not a required skill on most certification exams so it doesn't really make it into the curriculum. Plus on your internships and student teaching...you were being taught...which makes it a little hard to demonstrate how to teach others.

But neither here nor there.... let's talk about what we know about adult learning and about training paraprofessionals in the classroom in general.

## Steps for Training Paraprofessionals

Most effective training models as demonstrated by research include a series of (1) Providing information or instruction, (2) Demonstration of the skill or modeling, (3) Practice and coaching (rehearsal)—can be done by role play or in the moment, and (4) Feedback on performance—both positive and corrective.

So when we look across the literature, that's really what we know as the steps that lead to the most successful behavior change. There are a lot of different models of this. Sometimes it's called coaching, sometimes it's called mentoring, sometimes it's called leadership. In ABA we refer to this as Behavioral Skills Training, but it's the same set of strategies that professional development research has told us for years is most effective.

## Why Lecture / Information Isn't Sufficient to Train Paraprofessionals

So let's talk for a minute about why that lecture or didactic information isn't sufficient to train paraprofessionals. We often tend to think that lecture-based training is the best. At least it's the one that's most accessible and it certainly one of the easiest for us to do. And we are frustrated that our paraprofessionals don't get included on professional development days in a lot of situations.

But really, what we learn best in an instructional context like lectures is really basic overview information, introduction to new ideas, and frameworks of



programs. Very few people actually leave that lecture type training and actually make changes in their classroom. So we don't see a carry over.

You know we do for some teachers. Some adults listen to that, it sparks new ideas, and they build it into what they're doing. But that isn't true across the board. So these strategies, that lecture strategy, doesn't really change behavior. Doing things actually changes the way we interact and teach...and getting reinforcement and correction is what keeps our behavior change going in the right direction.

### Learning to Play the Piano

So I want to talk about playing the piano for a minute. And you may say, what does piano playing have to do with training? And hopefully you will find out. Think about learning to play the piano. I can stand up and tell you, trust me, all about the keys, how to read music, the notes, the pedals, etc. Now you know about a piano. So I've told you all that. Can you play it? Probably not (assuming you've never played piano before). And I will tell you as someone who took piano lessons for eight years, that would not be sufficient for me.

### Modeling Playing the Piano

Next up, I can model piano playing for you. So think about this...does going to a concert and watching a performer change your ability to play the piano? I wish it did because I could have reclaimed a good part of my childhood that was spent practicing the piano. Even when you have a model that isn't a virtuoso and you watch pieces of playing the piano—say starting with a simple piece, you might gain skills and begin to play adequately. But without feedback, you probably don't know what you are doing wrong. You don't know what to listen for. I mean, it's a piano so you will probably know if the notes you play aren't right (unless you are tone deaf and don't get that feedback), but you probably aren't going to have the timing, and the volume and the pedal use as adeptly as you would be if you have feedback on what you are doing right and what you are doing wrong. In order to get there, I'm going to need a lot of practice. And since I took piano lessons for 8 years of my childhood, I probably need more practice than most since I still can't play. Some staff will need more practice than others. And some will need more feedback than others on specific areas. But the practice and the feedback are critical components to being skilled at playing the piano.



## Training is Creating New Habits

If you have ever taken music lessons, you know that certain parts of playing an instrument is a habit. You have to get to the point where you don't even think about what your hands are doing when you are reading music, for instance. And that habit doesn't come over night. I spent 3 years playing the oboe (more successfully than the piano), but when I started my focus was on where to put my fingers to play specific notes. By the end of 3 years, I never thought about my fingers...I thought about the notes and my fingers did their job.

Think about driving. It's the same thing. You have to be teaching, you have to practice. That's why you get an a learner's permit. So once you have your learner's permit, you have to practice and get feedback. That's why you need supervision. So eventually you get to the point where you drive from school to home at the end of the day and you have no idea how you got there because it's happening all so automatically. It's the same principles when we're training adults in the classroom.

## It's the Same Principles When Training Adults

Training paraprofessionals (or any adults) to work with students is the same. When you start working in the classroom, you are thinking about everything you say and do in detail. Over time as you become more adept and more comfortable, you stop thinking about what to say and you just say it.

For instance, when you start to learn to ignore challenging behavior—think back to the first time someone told you to do that...it sounded weird didn't it? The idea that you shouldn't say or do anything in response to something a student said or did? You had to really work at it. IT was a lot of work to fight the impulse to respond.

IF you haven't been doing it long, you are probably still working at it. But if you've been at this for a while, it probably comes as second nature to you. You might not even notice the behavior you are not attending to anymore.



So, knowing the critical elements to changing behavior (i.e., changing habits), let's talk a bit about HOW you can possibly get these steps done in your classroom while you have 50 million other things you need to be focusing on.

## Presenting Training Information

How do we present them with information about why we do what we do and what the strategies when they come to school and leave school with the students? I'm not a big fan of putting a video in for the students to watch to allow staff to meet. I recognize that sometimes it has to be done, but I like to find other solutions that keep students engaged. I also know that many of our students would not watching that video after a few minutes, so it doesn't always work as a strategy.

So some strategies you might use to give the team instructional information without pulling away from instruction might be make a quick three minute video of how to implement the strategy. If you want, you can use the 30 behavioral strategy videos I created that are in the free resource library. I'll link to the sign up for them in the show notes. If you want, you can go to our free resource library on the blog and you'll find videos of 30 behavioral strategies that I did that are three to five minutes long. They're free, they're in our free resource library and I'll link how to sign up for them in the show. If you've done a webinar or a part of the resource library, you may still need to reregister for them, but it'll all just go into the same account.

When making the videos you just need to explain what is being done and why. This gives background information and lets them know the overall expectations in using the strategy. For instance, you might have a video that shows them how to complete a data sheet. Or just a video explaining why ignoring of a behavior is important for a particular student based on the function of his behavior. Send the video to their phone or their iPad and try to carve out a few minutes during lunch or specials, perhaps where you give up a bit of your planning time to supervise the students, to watch the video. That way they know WHY what you are asking them to do is important and what it means.

## Video Modeling

The next key element is modeling or demonstrating the strategy. You could use quick videos for that as well. For instance, just set up your phone to



video you implementing a curriculum during instruction. Or model prompting strategies in a quick video to show them what the different types of prompting look like, or how to fade prompts out. You could do this with a student, if you have video consent, or you can do it with a staff member. Similarly, you can walk them through how to complete a data sheet by just videoing how that works..

If you are a member of the [Special Educator Academy](#), we actually have several data-sheet Quick Wins that are designed for you to download them and use them for this purpose. If you use my sample (group, embedded) data sheet, there is a [free tutorial in my TpT store](#) that has a downloadable video walking staff through how to use the data sheet that you can use. And I'll link to that in the show notes. Just go to [autismclassroomresources.com/episode23](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode23).

## How Do You Get the Hands-On Modeling and Feedback Done?

First, let's start with the fact that all of your training, and especially your feedback, need to be embedded into the relationship you are building with your team. I talk about building relationships with your team in episode 1 of the podcast, so just go to [autismclassroomresources.com/episode1](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode1).

### Run I-Man Down and Step Back

Every two weeks or so, run [a I-man down plan](#). I'm going to link out to a [tutorial](#) I have on the blog that is actually pulled directly from the Special Educator Academy where we talk a lot about training paraprofessionals and building classroom teams. The video will walk you through how to set up a I-man down plan that can be critical for training staff, but also is really helpful when it's flu season or any time you are short-staffed.

To give you the short version of a I-man down plan, you are rearranging your schedule and your zoning plan to manage your classroom with fewer staff. I have had settings in which we had a 2-man down, 3-man down plans as well. This allows you to step back for training.

Using the I-man down plan, you could

- 
- Have a paraprofessional you want to train freed up (as the I man down) so they can observe you instructing specific lessons or managing a specific behavior during an activity.
  - Have a staff member take over your center and observe the staff implementing the strategies in that center. Take that opportunity to provide feedback (positive and corrective) in the moment. This allows the paraprofessional to change and get further feedback.
  - Have a staff member teach your activity at a certain time of day or eliminate the activity you usually run and observe staff interactions with a student with challenging behavior. Use that opportunity to observe and give feedback on implementing the behavior plan.
  - Or eliminate your duties as the one man down and model for a staff member how to run his/her center, have them do it and give them feedback.

## Other Options to Free Yourself Up for Paraprofessional Training

Have someone else in the room run a group activity to allow you to stand back and observe students' progress or provide training or modeling to other staff on prompting

Arrange for a related service provider to come in for a period of time during the day one or two days a week. They could run an activity and free up a staff member to observe, model, or train. It also just allows you to step and see how things are going. And I've seen this done a lot where speech and OT team up in a self-contained classroom and come in and do say a cooking activity once a week. And that becomes a time that you can pull staff because you've got some extra hands in the classroom.

Does this mean that you are reducing the amount of instruction going on to your students when you run a I-man down plan? Yes, it does. But here's the thing...you are sacrificing a day a month (or a day every couple weeks in the first weeks of school) to make sure that ALL of your students are getting the type of instruction they need from trained staff. And that means that on the other 8 days of the two week period, your students are getting better instruction across their day.

## Strategies for Giving Feedback



So let me talk for a minute about strategies for giving feedback. Remember first, that feedback shouldn't stop when the person meets "criteria for mastery." Just like it shouldn't stop there with our students. We need to feed the behavior or the skill to keep it going. And we need to prevent skills from slipping (for ourselves as well as staff) by correcting problems before they go too far.

I talk about giving feedback in much more detail in Episode 5 of the podcast (just go to [autismclassroomresources.com/episode5](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode5) to check it out). One of the important elements I talk about in that episode is the importance of having feedback go both ways. Part of team building is taking feedback from your staff to prevent that program slippage too. And I try to channel my inner Brene Brown about how we should be giving feedback.

But, I want to just add one element here in relation to making time for leaving feedback given that it needs to be ongoing. Don't be afraid to leave notes for your staff, particularly if they are positive. If you see something amazing, drop a quick email, text or note about it when you get a chance. You want to let them know all those positive things cause we want the positive to outweigh the negative just like we do with our students.

But you can also use notes to give feedback and communicate with staff about things like data that was collected. I often would use post-it notes on data sheets to ask questions when there was limited time to talk about what was recorded. And I very often would leave post-its on data collection forms with positive feedback about their collection, the student's progress (which should reflect on the person instructing) and even with small corrections like, perhaps we can up his number of easy questions, so he gets reinforced more often.

## Conclusion

I know that training paraprofessionals in the classroom is hard. It's hard to find the time and it is hard on the relationship and team at times. But there are some advantages to putting in that time and effort.

The team will be trained in the strategies specific to the students you work with. Generalized training is nice, but nothing compares to knowing how to



implement strategies that are specific to your students' behavior plans and instructional needs.

In addition, classrooms staff will know how to implement strategies the way YOU want them to. Let's face it, there are lots of different educational models out there. And while many of them are essentially the same strategies, everyone may have a different language to talk about them. That's just the nature of the educational field. So demonstrating and modeling strategies is a good way to get away from the jargon and focus on the doing.

And finally, training staff develops classroom teams. It builds collaboration, especially when you invite paraprofessionals to give you feedback on your performance in the classroom. That makes it a two-way street and helps to build those relationships that are important to keeping the team going.

I would love to know your thoughts and questions about training staff to implement data, behavioral, and instructional strategies in the classroom. Hop over to our free Facebook group at [specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection) and share your thoughts and strategies.

Also, if you found this podcast to be helpful or had thoughts you wanted to share, I would love you to share the episode with friends and tag me on Instagram at [autismclassroomresources](https://www.instagram.com/autismclassroomresources) or leave [a review on iTunes](#) with a comment about what you liked, or do both. That would be a real help to me and I would appreciate it.

I've got a free download for you on some informational links that you can use for training paraprofessionals and more information at the blog posts, so hop on over to [autismclassroomresources.com/episode 23](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode23). Thanks for spending this time with me and I hope to see you again for another episode next week.