

# The 7 Steps to Successful Parenting

A Guide to Gaining  
Cooperation While Building  
Better Relationships

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## **The 7 Steps to Successful Parenting: A Free Guide for Parents and Professionals**

By Robert Schramm, MA, BCBA

Parents working to help their children overcome the effects of Autism, Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), Downs Syndrome or other diagnoses face many daily challenges. The same is true for parents of typical children who have developed an ability to thwart all supports designed to control or guide them. As a consultant working with the sciences of Applied Behavior Analysis and Verbal Behavior I seldom get through a day where I am not asked a question that includes the phrase “How can I get my child to \_\_\_\_\_?” That question typically ends with “stay seated during meals,” “not run into the street,” “stop picking on his sister,” “do her homework,” “use the toilet,” or any one of a thousand different things that children with or without a diagnosis might choose not to do when asked. The problem with these questions is that they are all symptoms of the same concern: the family has not effectively earned instructional control with their child. Until they do, life will always be about trying to put out one fire after the other, hoping to get through the day without getting too badly burned.

Earning instructional control is the most important aspect of any parenting intervention or learning relationship. Without it you are powerless to consistently guide your child. Without your guidance, your child’s skill acquisition and behavior becomes reliant solely on his interests. Unless you are able to help your child navigate his own desires in order to participate in your daily expectations, you will not be able to help him develop socially in meaningful ways. Instructional control can be defined as the likelihood that a given instruction or designated environmental stimulus will consistently evoke a desired behavior. For example, when you want your child to hang up their jacket upon coming home from school, do they see the closet as a signal that putting their jacket on a hanger is the choice they want to make at that moment or do you need to remind them, nag them, eventually yell at them and/or hang the jacket up yourself?

Instructional control can be thought of as nothing more than a positive working relationship. Depending on your choice of interventions you may have heard instructional control described in terms such as: building cooperation, compliance training, developing a master/apprentice relationship, or earning your child’s respect. Regardless of what type of approach you prefer to use with your child, you will be unable to teach your child everything you want him or her to learn if you do not earn their willingness to follow your lead.

Depending on whose version of an approach to intervention you have studied you likely have some ideas about how to gain instructional control with your child. The best approaches usually involve trying to gain engagement by finding areas of mutual interest or sharing experiences pairing yourself with reinforcement and then slowly adding simple instructions into the play. These instructions are usually for things that your child is likely to already want to do. Since he wants to follow these directions you can easily reinforce this direction following with more fun and reinforcing items. Over time you begin to increase the amount and difficulty of the instructions as your child becomes more willing to work for you because you are proving that you are willing to consistently make that cooperation worthwhile. For some children this is all that it takes

to begin to develop a better working relationship. But how does one initiate this practice in an already in-progress household with multiple children, school and work responsibilities and a history of negative behavior? By itself, this technique of respecting your child's desires and asking for something in return when needed is grossly insufficient to help children overcome the allure of their current, "I say it, Mom and Dad does it," lifestyle.

Attachment Parenting is wonderful in theory and can build amazing relationships but, it doesn't necessarily lead to the development of instructional control. The same is true with other so-called "Positive Parenting" approaches. In fact, many of the families I have consulted with who have been proponents of this style of parenting have found that over the years their positive relationships have been eroded by worsening behavior that they are helpless to address. Conversely, many families are told by their family members or friends that if they were just stricter with their children they would have better instructional control. But, often this leads to trying to gain cooperation through anger, intimidation and threats of violence (spanking) which clearly leads to less than desirable relationship building. In the cases of children with diagnosis such as Autism or ODD, simply being strict will not work, as children can escalate their behavior to levels a strict parent is not willing to meet. As the lead supervising behavior analyst of Europe's largest Verbal Behavior Autism Service since 2004, I have been tasked with offering the best approaches possible to helping families earn instructional control with their behaviorally challenging kids. To better help parents develop a lasting positive teaching relationship, I began to pioneer my own guidelines based on the methods we used to resolve the problems families faced by pinpointing weaknesses in the existing available methodology. These guidelines, based on well-researched behavior principles, eventually became a series of 7 Steps that allow parents to enlist the environment as an ally in their battle against challenging behavior.

I published these steps under the name "The 7 Steps to Earning Instructional Control" as part of my first book *Motivation and Reinforcement-Turning the Tables on Autism* published in 2007 with a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition now in print since 2011. I have also published a second book by the name *The 7 Steps to Earning Instructional Control* with my friend and colleague Dr. Megan Miller, BCBA-D. It was the success and dissemination of these books that led me to become a guest speaker in workshops, conferences, and school district trainings for the past dozen years. Although most of my work has been focused on children with disabilities, I began to recognize that the 7 Steps to Earning Instructional Control were not just imperative for helping to ensure families build positive relationships and gain better cooperation from their children with autism and related disorders but, it was also just as imperative for children with ODD, ADHD, anxiety, and typical children with behavioral challenges.

The debate between the importance of building attachments vs. using discipline is one I hear every day in the world of parenting. When a child is growing and developing in a typical manner, and when you have the ability to communicate in ways that lead you to success, this debate is inconsequential. You can choose to focus on being a friend and confidant to your child or you can focus on being an authority figure based on your beliefs about raising your children. However, when your child is encountering

challenges in life and your family morale is being eroded by difficult behavior, attachment parenting becomes permissive parenting while being strict turns into being an authoritarian. It is in these situations that one must stop looking at how they want to parent and start determining how they need to parent to be successful for the sake of their child's future. You see, we are all built differently and react to the world in different ways. I am the first of four boys in my family. My brothers and I were parented quite the same way with some minor differences due to age and experience. However, each of my brothers and I reacted to that parenting quite differently. One became a nurturer, one an over-achiever and another a rebel. So, if there was just one correct way to parent wouldn't all kids being parented the same way turn out similarly? Obviously that doesn't happen. The truth lies in the fact that we all need different things. Being a good parent really lies in being able to identify and adjust our parenting approach to your own child's needs.

Something I see often in my consulting is one parent being the strict one and the other permissive. The child tends to listen better to the strict parent while spending more time and builds a better relationship, with the permissive one. The problem is the permissive parent is most often unhappy because they are constantly struggling to get their needs met in the relationship that focuses totally on giving the child what he or she wants. The child then learns to play the two parenting types off each other, causing the disciplinarian to think that the other is weak and at fault for their own inability to gain cooperation. At the same time the permissive parent fears that the strict parent's relationship is going to blow up at any given time and destroy the family unit. The debate between permissive or understanding parenting vs. strict or discipline-oriented parenting is, for me, a non-starter. Neither approach is universally correct and neither will give you the best outcomes with most kids. The fact of the matter is that successful parenting should fall somewhere in the middle of these two polar opposites and must include important aspects of both to be truly effective.

I sit across the table from parents almost every day. I often have to work to pull them both back to the center through an approach that saves 75% of all interaction time for fun, reinforcement, and positive engagement but expects cooperation and respect to parental authority during the other 25%. It is an approach that takes the onus of behavior change off of your sheer will and desire and puts it onto the tools you have available in your environment that will truly work for you (once you know how to wield them). It is an approach that refuses to resort to physical aggression, yelling, or intimidation but, also doesn't allow inappropriate behavior or refusals to follow important requests. It truly is the best of all worlds when it comes to parenting and has proven itself a strong-enough system to work with thousands of families of children with the most challenging behavior disorders in the world. The system is based on basic behavior and learning principles that have been proven effective scientifically. The best part is that there are only seven important steps to remember!

Once you have systematically applied these 7 Steps to your child's environment, you will no longer feel the need to try to actively control your child. Your child's natural desires will become his motivation to participate in joint activities, follow instructions, and share in the responsibility of maintaining social interactions. He will begin making the choice to actively engage in increasingly difficult tasks because you have earned his

desire to maintain your interaction. It is only when your child is making the independent choice to maintain and prolong your interactions that you can begin guiding him beyond his previous limitations.

The 7 Steps work because they act as a barrier, blocking off your child's access to unearned reinforcement. This leaves items and activities that act as reinforcement available for you to apply them to the behaviors you actually want to increase. But, they also actively motivate and reinforce the skills and behavior choices you want to see in systematic ways. By implementing the 7 Steps comprehensively throughout your daily interactions you can give your child every reason to want to cooperate with your goals, but will also know how to react appropriately when he doesn't. It will provide a system for you to remain calm during a crisis, confident in the knowledge that what you are doing is successfully changing future behavior. The 7 Steps are easy to understand and with some consideration and practice easy to implement as well. However, the failure to adhere to even one of the following 7 Steps can upset the entire balance. Your child will likely be able to find a way to avoid the benefits of your positive interactions and will continue to thwart your desire to build the positive relationship and cooperation you need to peacefully coexist.

The 7 Steps is not a linear system. You are not going to be expected to do Step 1 for several days or weeks and then move on to Step 2. Instead, consider each step as a basic parenting principle that you must always be sure to fulfill throughout your daily interactions. Step 1 will always need to be in play, as will the expectations of Step 2, 3 and all the way to 7. The immediate step you are focusing on however will change throughout the interaction as you respond to your child's choices.

So, without further ado, I present to you The 7 Steps to Successful Parenting:

**Step 1. Show your child that you are the one in control of the items or activities he wants to hold, have, do, or play with and that you will decide if, when, and how long he can have access to them.**

Anything your child prefers to do or play with while he is alone is potential reinforcement for his positive behavior choices. Your control over these items is essential in the early stages of earning instructional control. Your child should not be deprived of prized objects. Rather, he should be expected to earn time with them by following simple instructions and behaving appropriately.

The best way to use control of your child's reinforcement to support your behavior goals is to begin deciding what items your child can have in his environment and what he can do to cause you to introduce or remove them. To restrict reinforcement, begin by organizing preferred items in your child's room and the remainder of the house. Put these objects in a place where they can be seen but not accessed by your child. At the very least, make sure that your child knows where they are now being kept. A clear container should suffice for younger children. A locked room or a locked cabinet in the child's room may be needed for older children.

Restriction of reinforcement becomes more important once you begin working with your child. Whenever you see him put down a reinforcing item you must immediately put it

away. If he walks over and begins to play with, hold, or look at something that you haven't thought to restrict, take note of that item and when he is finished, remove it from the environment. This way you can reintroduce it as a possible reinforcer. If your child has favorite activities, consider ways that you can control these as well. Mini-trampolines can be hung against the wall, televisions can be unplugged or remotes can be removed. The internet can be turned off and swings can be lifted out of reach when not in use.

Learning how to take control of the effective reinforcers in your environment is a much simpler and more effective tool than the alternative... trying to take control over your child. The only way to show a current behavior attempt is unsuccessful is to make it unsuccessful at gaining its intended purpose. You can do that by controlling the reinforcer and holding it back from your child or by controlling your child and holding him or her back from the reinforcement. Controlling reinforcement is much easier and less likely to lead to physical aggression as a response.

Step 1 is all about the ability to quickly control and manipulate your child's access to reinforcement. It is not about depriving him of things he likes but, making sure that he is aware that his access is always dependent on your permission and you have a system or procedure in place that allows you to either give access or take it from moment to moment whenever necessary.

**Step 2. Show your child that you are fun. Make each interaction you have with him an enjoyable experience so that he will want to follow your directions to earn more time sharing experiences with you.**

In this step we ask that 75% of every interaction you have with your child be reserved for the process of pairing yourself with fun activities and known reinforcement. Pairing activities should be led by your child's motivation and should include mostly declarative language. You should practice sharing your thoughts and ideas with your child in silly and exciting ways without requiring anything in return. What is he showing you about what he desires and how can you make those items or activities more fun because you are involved with them?

To pair yourself with a young child, follow him around and when he shows interest in things play along with him. Make his playtime more fun because you are a part of it. If your child wants music, you should be the one to provide the music. In addition, you could hold him, bounce and dance with him while he is listening. It is perfectly okay to turn off the music when he chooses to leave the area or begins to play or behave inappropriately (Step 1). However, it is important, especially in the early stages of instructional control, to demonstrate that you will immediately turn it back on as soon as he returns or ceases the inappropriate activity. You should always work to increase his level of enjoyment beyond what he would be capable of on his own. Be careful not to take any fun out of the item. This is sometimes more difficult than you think. If playing with your child is not something you are particularly good at, you should practice. Good pairing is essential to good teaching.

To pair yourself with an older child you need to be just as mindful about what he prefers. Perhaps playing games with you is not something he would consider fun no matter how

much you tried to make it so. Perhaps, just watching tv together or watching him play a game could act as pairing for you. Giving him opportunities for favorite food items, listening to his stories about friends, or just taking him shopping or rooting for his sporting events can also be pairing. For some parents, just finding two nice things to say to their child before commenting on a less desirable behavior can help.

Pairing yourself with reinforcement will look very different depending on the age and interests of your child. Pairing can be playing a game but it can also be watching him play a video game, taking him to the park, or shopping for clothes. There is no limit to what can be paired with when you understand what your child values as reinforcement.

**Step 3. Show your child that you can be trusted. Always say what you mean and mean what you say. If you say your child should do something, don't allow him access to reinforcement until it has been acceptably completed. This includes prompting him to completion if necessary.**

Words are normally not consequences. They are threats of consequences. If you do not stick to your word your child will have no basis from which to make good decisions. During times of expectation, do not reward your child for avoiding you by letting your instruction remain unfulfilled. When you present a direction or instruction, you should expect your child to choose to satisfy that request. Until he decides to make that positive choice you must not allow him to experience any additional reinforcement. Not allowing other choices to be reinforced will make the choice you are trying to teach become in your child's best interest. When positive learning behavior is in your child's best interest he will choose it sooner and more often.

Consider your choice of words carefully. If you ask your child a question, he should be allowed to answer it and you must respect his decision even if it gets in the way of what you were intending. This means you must think about the possible responses before you ask the question. For example, you have asked your child if he wants to come do homework and he answers "no." Your child has not made an inappropriate response. In fact, you offered your child an option to work or not to work. He has opted not to work. You must realize that it was your decision to ask a question that caused the problem. You can avoid this by using specific language. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Tell your child exactly what you want him to do by direct instruction. When you say to your child, "I need you to sit down first," "It's time to go to bed," or "It's my turn. Please give it to me" you should always expect your child to respond with an appropriate response (although this may need to be prompted if the child cannot demonstrate the skill expected on their own). If you have a ball that your child wants to play with and you tell him to sit down first, you should not give him that ball until he chooses to be seated. If he does not take his seat, commit to the idea that you will withhold the ball until he makes a better choice regardless of how long that takes. Remember, you should only be giving instructions like these during 25% of the time when you are not playing/pairing yourself with reinforcement so the process of "meaning what you say and saying what you mean" is not a constant burden on your child's desires.

**Step 4. Show your child that following your directions is to his benefit and the best way for him to obtain what he wants. Give your child easy directions as often as possible and then reinforce his decisions to participate by following them with good experiences.**

Once you have established control over your child's reinforcers you can begin using them to support his appropriate behavior choices. To follow this step appropriately you need to be aware of Premack's Principle. In the case of teaching your child, this principle means that he must follow a direction and/or demonstrate an appropriate behavior, BEFORE you allow him to have something he wants. The best way to ensure that your child adheres to this principle is to practice making a request or issuing an instruction to your child before giving him anything that he might want from you. In fact, it is best to avoid giving instructions until you know something your child wants from you. Then you can give your direction with a simple, First \_\_\_\_ and then you can have what you want. Your direction can be anything related or useful such as asking that he "Throw that in the garbage" or "Sit down and I'll get it for you." It could also be to ask for a "high five" or simple motor imitation first to develop a cooperative give and take. The more opportunities your child is reinforced with something he wants after first following a simple direction or demonstrating an appropriate behavior, the quicker he will learn that following rules and directions is the best way to get to what he desires. He will quickly realize that your instructions are now pathways, not barriers, to better things.

Resist the temptation to ask your child if he wants something before you give him a requirement to meet in order to get it. You also want to stay away from "If \_\_\_\_\_, then \_\_\_\_\_" statements such as "If you put away your Legos I will give you some ice cream." These statements are shortcuts to getting what you want from your child but they are fraught with limitations and potential problems. It is always better to surprise your child with an item or action of your informed choosing after he has made a positive choice. The use of "If/Then" statements does not translate into better choice making for your child. Instead it invites him to begin negotiating with you. However, when your child comes to you for something, that is a perfect time to give an instruction and use of "First/Then" statements under his or her motivation is appropriate. The more you can give an instruction when you already know what your child wants from you, the more likely they are to cooperate and the more often you can reinforce cooperation with positive things.

To quickly get through the early phases of earning instructional control, provide your child with hundreds of opportunities a day to make an appropriate choice based on an direction. But, do so only for simple tasks when you know why he would want to do it (meaning you have his motivation already under your control). Then you need to immediately reinforce this positive choice. Once you have taken control over his reinforcement, providing him with opportunities to follow directions will be easy. Since you have access to his favorite items under your control your child must come to you to obtain what he wants. When he does, you only need to ask him to do something first.

Remember, there is a big difference between positive and negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement in most parental situations is a form of nagging the child or otherwise creating an aversive situation for him and then releasing that aversion after

he completes the request. If you feel you are constantly nagging your children it is likely that you are giving instructions without a known motivator in place and therefore you must repeat yourself over and over to get any compliance. The reinforcer in this case is the removal of your nagging. Negative reinforcement carries with it the negative side effect of reducing a child's desire to be with the adult who nags. Conversely, positive reinforcement is a form of reinforcement where the parent offers up something of value or interest after the behavior occurs making that behavior more likely in the future. Because this reinforcement stems from the parent giving something positive to the child after good behavior, it not only increases the behavior but also builds the child's feelings about the parent as a positive influence on his daily life. When we teach parents to use the 7 Steps, we always spend time discussing the differences between these two types of reinforcement and push families to focus their interactions on the use of positive reinforcement whenever possible.

Ultimately we have to move quickly into reinforcing with unexpected positive reinforcement. We don't want your child to make choices based on the thing they will get but rather the knowledge that if they continue to cooperate with your requests they can trust that you will continue to make it worth their while. Respecting Mom's authority is easier to do when Mom is respecting my human need to find benefit from my behavior.

**Step 5. In the early stages of earning instructional control with your child, reinforce after each positive response moving to an increasing variable ratio of reinforcement.**

Consistency is important because your child must understand that certain behavior choices always result in his coming in contact with something he values. The understanding that good choices lead to good things mirrors the realities of social life and will only occur if in the beginning every good choice is met with a positive result. Because many of these choices are based on the instructions you have given him, he will begin to see following these instructions as a necessary component to gaining good things as well. The connection of instructions leading to good choice making, leading to reinforcement, is not lost on a child who is very good at getting what he wants. As your child learns that it is in his best interest to attend to your directions and give good responses, he will start to apply the necessary effort to focusing on what you want from him. Ultimately, he will begin to come to you looking for an instruction or permission because he knows this is the first step to getting to his favorite things. This awareness of the importance of others is crucial in your child's relationship development skills and will only begin to occur if you consistently make following directions the best and fastest way that your child can access the things that he wants. That means reinforcing every single correct response from the start.

In the beginning don't let a good response of any kind pass without meeting some form of positive reinforcement. There is always some form of reinforcement available to you, perhaps a tickle, a swing in the air, a long loving deep pressure hug, a compliment, or an offer of something fun to do. Later, when your child is willing and able to follow your directions consistently, you can begin to thin out the ratio of reinforcement. In the beginning, every time you reinforce a behavior you are making a statement that this is a

behavior you want to see again in similar circumstances. Once your child understands this, he will also recognize that when you do not reinforce a behavior it is because you would not like to see that behavior again.

Once earned, instructional control can be maintained with less need for immediate reinforcement by slowly thinning out the amount of reinforcement through an increase in the response/reinforcement ratio. As your child's willingness to participate in learning improves, you should move your program forward by changing from a reinforcement ratio of one (reinforcing every response) to a variable ratio (VR) of two or three. This means that on the average you will follow every two to three responses with tangible reinforcement beyond just the use of praise. Next, you can move to a VR-5 and eventually a variable ratio of ten or more. The reason we use a variable ratio schedule of reinforcement is due to scientific study that has demonstrated it more effective in evoking consistent and strong responding than set or predictable schedules of reinforcement.

### **Step 6. Demonstrate that you know your child's priorities as well as your own.**

Track and record each of your child's favorite reinforcing items and activities. Then observe which he prefers in different situations. Make a list of his current reinforcers and try to find or develop a new reinforcing item or activity each day. Your child needs to be able to work for a wide variety of reinforcement.

In addition to knowing what your child wants you must also remain aware of your priorities. What is the most important thing for you to be teaching your child? Normally, when you work with your child you will have several different goals in mind at any one time. When this is the case, it is possible that a single behavior choice your child makes may be appropriate for one goal you are trying to meet but inappropriate for another. In these cases you need to know which target goals are your priorities. If your goal is to pair with your child you might respond to a behavior differently than if you are trying to focus on instructional control or skill acquisition. There is seldom only one correct way to respond to a behavior choice your child makes. It is important to know what your priorities are at any given time and make reinforcement choices based on these priorities.

For example, it is possible that you have a child who is currently not cooperating with any requests to help with chores around the house. Through the 7 Steps you have been able to show him that you control access to his reinforcers and he will only be given access when it has been earned through positive behavior (Step 1). He knows that you are mostly a lot of fun and worth cooperating to be with (Step 2). He has learned that once you say something you will follow through and he won't be able to talk or ignore his way out of it (Step 3). He also knows that whenever he does things you ask, you will find a way to make it worth it to him (Step 4) and being that your program is new, you are still reinforcing every good response so there will be a positive outcome for him if he cooperates (Step 5). So now, after receiving the instruction to throw something in the garbage for you, your child is choosing to get up from his game and do what you have asked but he is complaining and calling you names throughout the process. What do you do? Do you reinforce him with something positive like more access to his game or

do you withhold his game and make him do it again without complaining? Well, this answer will depend on where you are in your program and your current priorities. If you have not been getting any cooperation and now he is doing it willingly (albeit begrudgingly) it is likely good to reinforce this for now. But, over time, your priority will start to change as he is doing more and more for you on request. Now getting him to stop complaining or using bad language becomes more of a priority.

**Step 7. Show your child that ignoring your instructions or choosing inappropriate behavior will not result in the acquisition of reinforcement.**

This is sometimes the most difficult step to perform correctly and having a good behavioral consultant (preferably someone who is Board Certified as a BCBA) available to offer you guidance is recommended. This is particularly true if you have a child who is physically aggressive to you or a danger to themselves. The first six of the 7 Steps of instructional control are designed to give your child a very easy path to reinforcement through good behavior choices. You have shown that you control access to his favorite things and that you will decide if and when he can have them (Step 1). You are proving that being with you will be three times more fun than it is work and therefore you will make time with you worth any work you ask him to do (Step 2). You demonstrate that you will follow through with anything you say (Step 3). You have shown him that cooperation is generally fun and easy and always leads to good things (Step 4). And you are taking into account his favorite items as well as moderating his level of expectation through your priorities (Steps 5 and 6). When you do all of these items it would only make sense that your child would want to cooperate with you. However, even with the deck stacked the way we want it, your child may still choose to test you and try to refuse or choose an inappropriate behavior. After all, refusals and negative behavior likely already have a history of being reinforced making it understandable that your child will try them now. But, this is when you must move into Step 7 and make sure that these behavior choices no longer meet with any form of reinforcement.

In fact, commit to never allow your child to meet with reinforcement when he hasn't followed a direction or engages in an inappropriate behavior. You must consistently recognize when your child is behaving inappropriately and intentionally make that behavior unsuccessful in allowing him to gain what he wants. You do this simply by not reinforcing it. The main way that we do this is by applying a consequence called extinction. For example, when your child decides to leave the teaching setting, make sure he understands that his choice has no controlling effect on you. This can be best done through declarative statements such as, "I guess we are done playing," "Oh well," or "Bye." Non-Verbal reactions are also beneficial and important. Gather your reinforcing materials and walk to another part of the room. Divert your eye contact and/or turn your body away from your child. Continue to play with the items either by yourself or with other siblings. Make sure that your child has no access to your reinforcing objects and actions (or any other form of outside reinforcement) until he returns to finish the activity you requested. This encourages your child to make a conscious choice to follow your direction and return to participate in joint activities. Letting your child go and waiting until he chooses to come back is a much farther reaching option than trying to pull or hold him there against his will. Pulling your child to

work using nagging or physical force only increases your child's motivation to escape and/or negatively affects your relationship. For your interactions to be as productive as possible, he must decide that it is in his best interest to come to you and accept guidance from you. Do not force this decision by trying to convince him of it with words. Instead, set up the environment so that learning from you is your child's most beneficial option and then give him the opportunity to realize it. Even if, in the first several days, you feel like most of your time is spent waiting and not getting any positive responding, stay strong. You are guiding! What your child is learning during this waiting period is more valuable than the unmotivated or forced cooperation you would otherwise be getting. What he is learning to do is choose participation. By following these steps comprehensively you will find that your waiting time will begin to quickly reduce and the level of motivated participation your child starts to show will far surpass any you have achieved in the past. In our work we have found that children who choose to engage and rejoin positive social interactions due to a comprehensive application of The 7 Steps of Instructional Control are far less likely to leave it again. When they do leave or refuse to cooperate again and see the immediate withdrawal of all forms of reinforcement occur, it will be for increasingly shorter periods of time. It is only through this motivated cooperation that your child will determine that continued participation in your choice of activities is better than the alternative and worth the requirements you have set. This result will be true, however, only if you make it true. You must be able to show him through the first 6 Steps that cooperation is always ultimately "worth it" and with Step 7 you show him that refusals or disrespect is not.

The reason you use extinction as a tool of instructional control is that it is an extremely powerful way to reduce problematic behavior. Step 1 through Step 6 are designed to help increase frequency and quality of your child's positive behavior choices. When used correctly, these steps make life immediately easier for you and your child. He is following directions and participating in positive interactions with you and subsequently you are playfully giving him all of his favorite things. It is this part of instructional control that we want to spend the most time in as it is usually filled with joy and laughter. This is where you build your attachments and teach him to desire your relationship. Conversely, extinction and removal of reinforcement after refusals or inappropriate behavior are your willingness to set limits and, when need be, to use discipline. As I suggested earlier, this is how you get the best of both worlds. The better you learn to use all 7 Steps as needed, the more quickly you find yourself using less of Step 7 (withholding reinforcement) and spending more time in Step 2 (pairing yourself and showing your child you are fun).

Be aware, however, that the benefits of extinction procedures are not normally immediate. The results occur over time and exist in the absence of reinforcement, meaning you will likely see some pushback and escalated behavior. This is to be expected and is called the "Extinction Burst." However, this seventh step of instructional control must come into play whenever your child makes a choice that you do not want to see again or else you run the risk of reinforcing this behavior making it more likely to reoccur.

Step 7 must last only as long as your child is willing to make it last. As Step 7 is the complete shutdown of all available reinforcement for as long as it takes for your child to make a better decision, that shut down has to have an immediate end as soon as your child complies with your request or has made up for the negative behavior they chose. For example, if you ask your child to put on their shoes to go to the store and they refuse, you will need to take back the iPad (or turn off internet services), unplug the TV, say no to any requests for food or other opportunities and limit your attention until they have decided to put their shoes on. However, as soon as those shoes go on, all forms of reinforcement need to immediately become available again including your willingness to start pairing and praising them for their cooperation. The length of Step 7 is completely dependent on the child's current willingness to continue to subvert your goals for them but needs to last no longer than that. As soon as there is a positive resolution, you need to quickly jump back into Step 2 and start pairing yourself with reinforcement again before returning to your status quo rate of interaction (75% fun and no more than 25% following instructions). For Step 7 to truly be met your child not only has to find himself immediately without access to all of his favorite things he has to always know what he can do to earn them back. In other words, Step 7 is not about taking items away for the rest of the day or for the week. It is about having them immediately removed but always available for reintroduction as soon as the behavior has changed. If you find yourself in Step 7 and your child doesn't know exactly what they can do to get back to Step 2 with you, you aren't doing it correctly. The reason Step 7 works is because it is always the second of two paths available to your child. The first path is to cooperate or make a good choice which consistently leads him to better things, therefore making this path "worth it." The second path leads to an immediate shut down of all forms of reinforcement but only for as long as the child remains on that path. Access to path one needs to always be clear and available with reinforcement ready to follow his decision to once again participate in his/her role as a positive member of the family.

Extinction allows you to reduce problem behavior without the need for aversive punishment procedures. You need to realize, however, that extinction always comes with a cost: the extinction burst. An extinction burst is the period during which a behavior on extinction intensifies and/or increases before it will finally decrease. The extinction burst will sometimes be composed of behavior more severe than the one you are trying to extinguish. Initial periods of extinction burst may be long and difficult to endure. The danger of extinction is the consequences that come with giving in and reinforcing extinction burst behavior. If your child's extinction burst behavior is successful in gaining what he wants then this new, more extreme behavior will be more likely to occur in the future. So, it is extremely important that when you choose extinction (as we do often in Step 7) that you remain committed to following through with it. This means not reinforcing your child until he has followed your original instruction or chosen an appropriate replacement behavior to the one you want to reduce no matter how much his behavior escalates in the moment. However, even with this possible danger of reinforcing the extinction burst, extinction remains the best way to reduce inappropriate behavior choices and convince your child that following your instructions is the fastest and easiest way to getting what he wants. It is only through overcoming

each extinction burst with your child that you will ever fully earn instructional control and develop a positive and loving working relationship with him.

Extinction bursts will quickly begin to decrease in duration and veracity as your child realizes that the benefit of using these inappropriate behaviors no longer exists. Remember, the behavior he is using today was not learned today. It was learned in his history with reinforcement. We can't stop him from trying all the behavior he currently has reason to think might be successful in getting him what he wants. However, by purposely making sure it is not successful, we can start to make him less likely to try this behavior again in the future. In other words, the extinction burst behavior you have to deal with today is not a result of the program you are running today but actually a result of the past history your child has with you. Knowing this allows you to not stress about the behavior you are seeing in the moment but focus on what you can do to make this behavior less likely to occur when a similar situation happens tomorrow. If we implement Step 7 correctly today (and keep all the other steps up and running as well) we can remain comfortable in the knowledge that we are making tomorrow easier for us and more successful for your child.

Using extinction to reduce problem behavior can be a powerful tool but used inconsistently it has the potential to be as damaging as it is beneficial. When used correctly it can reduce extreme behavior choices in a matter of days or weeks. However, if you are not fully prepared to ride out all extinction bursts along the way, you will end up increasing the duration and severity of these behavior choices you are trying to extinguish. It is for this reason that I strongly suggest that you learn how to apply this seventh step under the guidance of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst whenever possible. (For more information on where you can find that help, go to [www.robertschrammconsulting.com](http://www.robertschrammconsulting.com))

Unfortunately, as much as you may want to, avoiding extinction is not a worthwhile option. Parents, teachers, and therapists sometimes avoid using extinction because in the beginning stages extinction bursts can be severe and disruptive. Extinction can be scary and difficult when you do not know how to most effectively perform the procedure. If you allow yourself to avoid using extinction because you fear extinction burst behavior, then you will likely be able to avoid your child's use of those behaviors in the short term. However, you will not remove the extinction burst behaviors from your child's repertoire. In fact, you will only be hiding them and delaying their use until you can no longer accept the growing severity of your child's inappropriate behavior choices. Your child will not learn that extinction burst behavior will not be effective in getting him what he wants until he has tried it enough times without success and you have shown him that cooperation and positive relationship building on his part will be universally effective as a replacement.

In addition to the process of gaining instructional control with your child, incorporating these 7 steps into your family lifestyle will ensure that a positive working relationship is maintained. No one step is more important than any other. They must all be considered and effectively accomplished on an ongoing basis. You, as your child's guide, need to be able to jump from one step to the next as needed. The more capable that parents, teachers and therapists become regarding these 7 Steps, the better and

faster their children will begin to choose positive behavior on a regular basis. My experiences with thousands of families all over the world have also shown that once instructional control has been earned, each subsequent person working with the 7 Steps with your child will find the process quicker and easier. Thus, when you and your spouse can earn instructional control it will be easier for Grandma and Grandpa to do so. In turn, Grandma and Grandpa's successes will make it even easier for your child's school teacher or aide to earn instructional control with your child. Additionally, families that have good instructional control through the 7 Steps also tend to have more positive and loving relationships. They spend most of their time in Step 2, pairing with reinforcement and everyone is able to get their needs met. The children are getting what they want in large enough measure to make good choices worthwhile to them and the parents are getting to have mostly positive interactions while also getting their children's help in creating a positive home environment.

In this guide I have provided the basic information you will need to start implementing the 7 Steps to Instructional Control with your child. Please realize that there is a science to the principles behind each step and an art to the implementation of them in a fluid environment like your home or school setting. Just knowing what needs to be done does not necessarily mean you will be successful. I know that many of you will take this information, digest it, come up with a plan and implement it successfully. It is not unlikely for you to find yourself seeing your relationship with your child becoming as much as 90% better in just a single month's time. You will be sitting there thinking, "was it really this simple all along?" Well, it is, **if** you have the right information and start to follow the 7 Steps. Please, when this positive result happens for you, take the time to get back to me and let me know how you did it and how fast it worked for you. I love hearing the success stories the 7 Steps have inspired. But, if you find that you struggle implementing these steps in any way, there are other layers of support available. I am the author of three separate books on the topic available in multiple languages that can be found at <https://knospe-aba.com/cms/us/robert%E2%80%99s-books.html>.

I am a consultant that can be reached internationally at the email address [robert@robertschrammconsulting.com](mailto:robert@robertschrammconsulting.com) I am also providing free information at the Facebook group "The 7 Steps to Successful Parenting" which can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/7stepsparenting/>. Please consider joining and friending me on Facebook at my professional profile "Robert Schramm BCBA."

Thank you for taking the time to learn about "The 7 Steps to Earning Instructional Control" and congratulations on your start to a new, more positive, working relationship with your child. I'm very excited for you and I hope to hear about your progress at the "7 steps" Facebook page soon!

# The 7 Steps to Earning Instructional Control:

By Robert Schramm, MA, BCBA

**Step 1.** Show your child that you are the one in control of the items or activities he wants to hold, have, do, or play with and that you will decide if, when, and how long he can have access to them.

**Step 2.** Show your child that you are fun. Make each interaction you have with him an enjoyable experience so that he will want to follow your directions to earn more time sharing experiences with you.

**Step 3.** Show your child that you can be trusted. Always say what you mean and mean what you say. If you say your child should do something, don't allow him access to reinforcement until it has been acceptably completed. This includes prompting him to completion if necessary.

**Step 4.** Show your child that following your directions is to his benefit and the best way for him to obtain what he wants. Give your child easy directions as often as possible and then reinforce his decisions to participate by following them with good experiences.

**Step 5.** In the early stages of earning instructional control with your child reinforce after each positive response moving to an increasing variable ratio of reinforcement.

**Step 6.** Demonstrate that you know your child's priorities as well as your own.

**Step 7.** Show your child that ignoring your instructions or choosing inappropriate behavior will not result in the acquisition of reinforcement.

Remember, if you need any help at all, email  
[robert@robertschrammconsulting.com](mailto:robert@robertschrammconsulting.com)