

Autism 24/7

**A FAMILY GUIDE TO LEARNING AT
HOME AND IN THE COMMUNITY**

Andy Bondy, Ph.D. &
Lori Frost, M.S., CCC/SLP



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About the Authors

Andy Bondy, Ph.D., has over 35 years experience working with children and adults with autism and related developmental disabilities. For more than a dozen years he served as the Director of the Statewide Delaware Autistic Program. He and his wife, Lori Frost, pioneered the development of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). Based upon principles described in B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, the system gradually moves from relatively simple yet spontaneous manding to tacting with multiple attributes. He designed the *Pyramid Approach to Education* as a comprehensive combination of broad-spectrum behavior analysis and functional communication strategies. He is the co-founder of Pyramid Educational Consultants, Inc., an internationally based team of specialists from many fields who annually train and act as consultants for thousands of people around the world.

Lori A. Frost, M.S., CCC/SLP, is a speech/language pathologist certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. She has over 25 years experience working with children with limited communication and severely challenging behavior. She is co-developer of the Picture Exchange Communication System and coauthor of the *PECS Training Manual, 2nd edition*. Ms. Frost is cofounder of Pyramid Educational Consultants, Inc. She has led regional, national, and international conferences and workshops. She consults to numerous schools and programs worldwide regarding the development of functional communication skills for children and adults with autism and related disabilities.

*To the many children, families, and professionals
for the many lessons they've taught us.*

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Introduction

When Becky was a year and a half old, she was not interacting with her parents or her brother as expected and she had yet to say a word. Soon, she was formally diagnosed with autism. Now Becky is almost 5 and has been attending an excellent educational program designed to help children with similar educational and developmental needs. The school program is based upon the principles of learning developed within the field of applied behavior analysis. It places a strong emphasis upon developing communication and learning skills typically seen in preschoolers. Becky's parents, George and Myra Engler, are proud that she has made excellent progress at school and pleased with the lessons her teachers have taught her.

George and Myra have studied the teaching strategies recommended by their daughter's school program. They spend many hours each week arranging for Becky to practice the skills taught at school. Despite their daughter's progress, however, including Becky within the normal routines of family life is problematic. Up until now, they have tried to meet Becky's everyday needs directly—often anticipating what she wants, avoiding situations that are stressful to her, and trying to use the materials they've observed the teachers using at school. But weekends are becoming too difficult for the family. Becky does not enjoy noisy, public places such as supermarkets or the mall. She doesn't enjoy watching her older brother play soccer or skateboard. She runs to her room whenever visitors, including relatives, come to the house. Sometimes Myra and George wonder if they are supposed to convert their home into a school so that all routines are familiar and comfortable for Becky.

Myra and George have decided that Becky needs to learn to be a full participating family member and are looking for ways to accomplish this goal. This book is dedicated to families like the Englers who are seeking to help their children with autism and related disabilities fully integrate into the routines of a family within and around the home.

During the past few decades, effective strategies have been developed to help children with autism learn many crucial skills. (See, for example, *Right from the Start* by Sandra Harris and Mary Jane Weiss.) For many young children with autism, learning to communicate with their parents, peers, and teachers is a daunting challenge. Important strides have been made to help these children learn to speak or to use other modalities to communicate. Children with autism often have difficulty in imitating the actions of their parents and siblings. Here, too, great progress has been made in developing strategies to teach imitation, and then to use this new skill to acquire other skills.

Still, Becky has difficulties with communication and imitation skills. She also has problems in acquiring skills everyone thinks of as “natural” for toddlers and preschoolers—playing with toys, engaging in imaginative play with friends, acting as “mommy’s little helper” when she is doing common household chores, and learning to have fun out in the community. Going into her neighborhood—whether to shop, visit doctors and other specialists, or play in the park—has become a stressful event for her and everyone in the family. Most children seem to enjoy “free time,” but Becky spends it in ways that often lead to serious behavior problems or “shutting down” in a manner that is difficult to get her out of. Sometimes, moving from room to room or activity to activity, or simply changing who is currently taking care of her causes Becky to loudly protest.

If your child is like Becky, your family may be experiencing some or all of the same frustrations related to integrating your child into your family life. If your child is older, you may have other difficulties, perhaps related to delays in acquiring self-help skills. You may worry that, unless your child masters these skills, she will continue to need intensive parental involvement, thus limiting the extent to which she will be able to enjoy her adult years.

This book is designed to help all families of children with autism spectrum disorders overcome the challenges that keep their family life from running as smoothly as they would like. In the next chapters, we

will provide examples of how George and Myra, and the families of other children with autism and related disabilities, can:

- effectively teach their children to participate in important as well as routine family activities at home and in the neighborhood;
- select appropriate skills associated with the routines of home life as well as communication and social skills;
- learn how best to use a variety of strategies, including many that are visually based, to help children communicate and to better understand our efforts to communicate with them;
- learn how we can help motivate children to learn often complex lessons while participating in home- and community-based routines;
- alter and expand goals over time so that the children can continue to demonstrate new skills. To accomplish these goals, we will describe teaching strategies that parents and other family members can successfully use with their children;
- minimize errors over time, since all learners occasionally make mistakes.

Our hope is that we can show that it not necessary for parents to convert their homes into a school. We are confident that children with autism spectrum disorders can effectively learn in all parts of the home as well as in the most common and important aspects of their neighborhoods—from stores to playgrounds. We will use many real-life examples to help make our suggestions as real and practical as possible.

The Pyramid Approach to Education

As the statewide director of a public school program for students with autism, the first author needed a strategy to organize the factors that teachers, specialists, and parents required to develop effective educational environments both in and out of school. The strategy developed to meet this need—the Pyramid Approach to Education—has been successfully applied within numerous classrooms on an international scale. (See *The Pyramid Approach to Education*

in Autism by A. Bondy and B. Sulzer-Azaroff, 2002, for a detailed description.) One indication of its success is the recognition received by the Sussex Consortium, which is part of the statewide Delaware Autism Program. With its complete implementation of the Pyramid model, this program received the 2002 Wendy F. Miller Autism Program of the Year Award in recognition of its excellence by the Autism Society of America (ASA).

The Pyramid Approach integrates broad-spectrum behavior analysis with a heavy emphasis upon functional communication. It provides a problem-solving strategy that school staff and parents can follow, both to achieve effective learning and to address common problems related to either challenging behaviors or slow acquisition of skills.

The shape of a pyramid is used to help address particular issues in an organized fashion. As with the construction of a real pyramid, we begin with certain issues at the base of the pyramid and gradually build our way up to form a well-balanced, solid model. The foundation of the Pyramid relates to the principles of learning first espoused by psychologist B.F. Skinner and demonstrated within the field of applied behavior analysis. Skinner stressed that the most important aspect of behavior is how it is functionally related to the environment. He studied how events that happen before (antecedents) and after (consequences) a behavior can influence the likelihood that the behavior will occur again or change in some way.

Next, the four base struts of the Pyramid deal with issues associated with “What to teach.” These topics include:

- a. a focus on functional skills and objectives in many different environments,
- b. motivational factors, with a stress on using powerful reinforcement systems,
- c. functional communication skills and critical social skills, and
- d. challenging behaviors, which we refer to as “contextually inappropriate behaviors.”

Once these core issues are in place, then we turn our attention to issues related to “How to teach.” These factors are organized around four key areas:

- a. generalization, which includes systematically planning to assure that the student can apply various skills in a broad and sustainable fashion,

- b. designing effective lessons that may differ in terms of their simplicity or sequence or in terms of whether they are teacher- vs. student-led,
- c. teaching strategies that may involve the use of prompts and how to eliminate them, as well as how to use feedback alone (“shaping”) to achieve learning, and
- d. planning to minimize errors and knowing how to react when the student makes errors.

Finally, we evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts and thus must address issues related to data collection and analysis.

It is important to understand that when this model is taught, everyone—regardless of their personal, educational, or teaching history—learns its elements and how to implement them in the same sequence. That is, staff and parents essentially undergo the same training, although the professional training of many staff will permit a deeper analysis of certain issues. The goal is to permit school personnel and parents to communicate with each other in a manner that will yield the most effective teaching environments for the children with whom we are all concerned.

How This Book Is Organized

We have organized the topics in this book to follow the basic sequence of questions posed by the Pyramid Approach. We will try to avoid overwhelming readers with highly technical terms or jargon, although we will use specific language to help clarify certain points. This book will not cover the contents of the Pyramid Approach in depth—for that goal, please refer to the book previously cited by Bondy & Sulzer-Azaroff. You may also wish to refer to the study guide that accompanies that book (*Study Questions, Laboratory, and Field Activities to Accompany the Pyramid Approach to Education in Autism*, Sulzer-Azaroff, Fleming & Mashikian, 2003).

This book will explore issues that parents like the Englers can take advantage of to successfully teach their children skills that are important at home and in their neighborhood. We will point out that while teachers and parents may use similar teaching strategies, there are aspects of home and community that are unique and that offer special opportunities when working on important skills. These skills

will include many functional ones that children need to become competent and independent while living at home, as well as skills needed to successfully navigate in the outside world.

We will first consider factors that will help parents choose goals that are reasonable and attainable, both in and around the home. We then will describe ways to help motivate your child to learn skills that you have found to be important. Some children with autism spectrum disorders may be able to actively help choose what is important for them to learn, but there will be times when you will need to help convince your child that a skill you pick is truly important! We will then focus on communication and social skills that will have lifelong influences regarding how your child interacts with people within your family and the community at large. Next, we will look at the many opportunities available within your home to help create effective lessons that will last throughout your child's life. We will continue with a discussion of teaching strategies that can be used by parents and other family members, and then focus on ways to react when our children make mistakes or simply don't do what we expect them to do. Since no one can guarantee that a particular teaching strategy will work, we will review ways that parents can collect information that will help them evaluate the effectiveness of their lessons. Finally, we will take an extensive look at how your child can best achieve the skills necessary to integrate into the neighborhood and community.

It is our firm belief, backed by our experience and considerable research performed by scores of people over many years, that children with autism spectrum disorders live most successfully and happily at home and in the community when they are engaged in functional activities, have a clear system of reinforcement in place, and have support for their communication skills, both expressive and receptive. When these three critical factors are in place, significant behavior management problems are greatly reduced and children learn new skills in ways that are efficient, practical, and enduring.