

# Getting Past Learned Helplessness for Children Who Face Severe Challenges: Four Secrets for Success

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## Problem:

### **Children who face severe multiple challenges:**

- Sometimes develop an attitude and learning style of learned helplessness - this can be a natural outcome of facing significant challenges
- May not be able to actively participate in daily routines
- Experience repeated failures when efforts to participate or communicate are not successful.
- Out of necessity, these children need to be dressed, fed and cared for, sometimes without even informal communication strategies to make choices and express opinions
- Sometimes they use only “waiting” or “fussing” strategies to get someone to come over and assist them.
- Over time, the child can begin to see herself as a passive participant who is not able to be actively involved in learning.
- This presents an additional challenge for a teacher who is trying to ignite the child’s inner flame of a desire to learn.

## Secret #1: Motivation

- Nobody does anything without a reason that makes sense to them at the time.
  - Motivation for learning comes from within a person - **Inborn Drives: 1. to Understand, 2. for Independence and Sense of Self, and 3. to Connect Socially with Others.**
- **Motivation for learning is based on the inborn drive to discover and understand the world around us:**
    - Problem of habituation (Boredom develops with too much repetition)
    - Balance novel and known: opportunities for practicing skills while still seeing the topic as stimulating and exciting. (For ex: repeated readings with variations and interaction)
    - Provide **Repetition with Moderate Differences.**
    - Nothing is as powerful as the feeling of success when we have accomplished something on our own, or figured something out by ourselves.
    - If something is too easy, it does not stimulate our natural curiosity.
    - Too difficult, we will not be motivated to even attempt the task.
    - It is difficult to find tasks that challenge these children at just the right level.
    - Children who face severe challenges are often presented with tasks that are either too easy or too difficult physically or cognitively.
    - Often participation is done in a hand over hand fashion with little effort from the child. This can lead to passivity.
    - Our task as educators and therapists is to provide opportunities where students can succeed.
    - A range of assistive Technology from Velcro™ to computers can provide a means for children to accomplish physical tasks.
    - Set up activities for the child to use a combination of knowledge and trial and error to achieve success.

- Theme based learning provides multiple experiences with a concentrated set of vocabulary and concepts without being monotonous.
- **Inner Drive to develop independence and sense of self**
  - Continuously provide opportunities for making choices - enable the child to feel "In Control"
  - Making choices helps to increase cognitive engagement and reduce passivity
  - Begin with objects and move to pictures with and without voice-output
  - Provide multiple opportunities for meaningful choices throughout the day.
  - Try presenting choices of actions instead of objects for increased motivation and more natural repetition.
  - Offer choices for frequent short activities, or choices within an activity instead of choosing an activity
  - Provide children active experiences with early computer play where the child can direct the actions of the computer through simple choices and then observe the results.
  - Use of 2 switches with different functions connected to computer, battery toys and/or simple voice output devices.
  - Use of eye-pointing and eye-gaze frame for children who face physical challenges and children with Rett Syndrome
  - Partner-assisted scanning
  - Touch point choices (Gardner-Fox)
- **Motivation for communication is driven by an inner need to connect with other people:**
  - Attention and connection with others are often powerful motivators.
  - Engineer child-directed choice making within any activity for cognitive engagement.
  - Communicate a feeling of value or worth as a human being.
  - Give children tasks that are truly appreciated by, or important to, someone else, motivation is likely to be increased. (For Example: "Let me know when you see Dad drive up so we can surprise him at the door" or helping classmates review for a test through questions and interaction using a voice output device.)
  - Provide frequent opportunities for social interaction and connection with other people. (Sequenced Social Scripts)

### **Secret #2: Active Participation**

- Active participation can be difficult for children who face severe multiple challenges
- They cruise through the day as a passive passenger, never needing to pay attention to the road or even helping with navigation of where they are headed. (Guided Tour vs. Following a Map)
- They are cared for and entertained regardless of their participation level.
- This happens sometimes in inclusive settings where the main objective is social exposure rather than real learning goals.
- It can happen in a self-contained setting, where the routine may be so structured and predictable that there is little room for change or surprise.
- The problem is that learning is less likely to take place when the child is in a passive role.
- The research is clear that active learning is vastly more effective for all children.
- Teachers and therapists need to think outside the box and create participation

opportunities within activities.

- While children can not often have control of the sequence of the daily routine, there can be opportunities within routines that effect them. (For example, deciding who will be their peer buddy in social studies, selecting the book for story time, or competing with friends in an adapted game that reinforces concepts just learned in a lesson.)

### **Secret #3: Multiple Modalities**

- These children often have weaknesses in one or more areas of sensory processing.
- With not being able to move their bodies into position to see, hear or feel what they would like, this problem is compounded.
- Processing information is often easier and more effective when presented through a variety of modalities such as sight, sound touch and movement.
- When communication is difficult, it is especially important to enhance the auditory component of language with other modalities.
- It is important for children to experience language receptively that utilizes multiple modalities.
- Using picture communication symbols, voice-output and sign language as input can provide multi-sensory information for cognitive processing.
- Modeling the use of multiple systems, teaches subtle nuances and differences of using these systems, which become natural components of communicating

### **Secret #4: Natural Contexts**

- Learning takes place most effectively within the context of a meaningful event and not in an isolated drill and practice session.
- Helps children relate what they already know to the new information - thus increasing motivation and retention.
- Provides meaningful opportunities for practice with natural variability to maintain interest.
- When learning is presented in an isolated situation, out of the natural context, there is less for the child to associate with and fewer opportunities for practice.
- Augmentative systems need to be seen by the child as a natural means for communication. This is another reason that the systems must be used by others, while communicating to the child.
- A variety of communicative functions need to be modeled in appropriate pragmatic contexts.
- Children's attempts to communicate also need to be responded to and expanded upon using the same systems that the child is using.
- Provide activity specific vocabulary on augmentative communication devices.

### **Implementation Strategies:**

- Assessment, evaluation and vocabulary development are on-going TEAM processes.
- SETT model: Student, Environment, Task, Tools (Zabala)
- Focus on function - not ability to use a particular device (ex: interacting with people)
- Input before Output (Aided Language Stimulation, Goossens', Crain, and Elder)
- Multiple Modality Immersion
- Model in Natural Contexts
- Plan for and Monitor Participation, Success and Cognitive Engagement