The Function of Preference Assessments for Students and Their Importance in Applied Behavior Analysis Techniques

Preference assessments are an integral piece of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) but, first, what is ABA? ABA involves research-based strategies for conducting preference assessments, teaching behaviors (including academic behaviors) by using specific and systematic methods for instruction, providing consistent and scripted adult-response strategies following various student behaviors, presenting highly motivating and immediate reinforcement following defined (correct or appropriate) behaviors, and determining systems of data collection and analysis.

Various ABA-based teaching approaches exist and can be used to teach your students, dare I write...*endless* and important behavioral, social, academic, and/or communicative skills. A few examples of ABA-based approaches follow:
- PRT (Pivotal Response Training)
- DTT (Discrete Trial Training)
- AVB (Applied Verbal Behavior)
- PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)

Across all established ABA-based teaching approaches, consistent ABA principles apply and several of those principles follow:
- Direct one-to-one instruction with a highly preferred adult
- Task analysis to define targeted behaviors
    - [Task Analysis](#) is the process by which a larger task is broken down into smaller, more manageable tasks.
    - The process of task analysis can be used to determine which small and necessary steps can be taught and reinforced as a means to teach the larger task. Larger skill areas to target could include the following: Behavioral Compliance, Expressive Communication, Receptive Communication, learning Routines, Independent Play, Social Skills, Academic Tasks etc.
- Preference assessments to determine reinforcement options
- Data-based reinforcement schedule to increase desired behavior (i.e., determining the frequency and duration of reinforcement following a student's correct response to a presented task)
- Determined contingencies to earn reinforcers (i.e., clearly defining correct student-responses and only providing immediate reinforcement following those responses)
- Defined response strategies following a student's incorrect response to a presented task (e.g., ignoring, neutrally saying "no" and then providing the correct answer etc. while withholding reinforcers)

The process of learning ABA-based strategies for implementation takes training, time and continued practice; however, the following tasks are effective first steps that you can practice now, as an integral step in the journey of teaching and shaping appropriate behaviors, social skills and/or academic skills that will support your students as they continue to evolve.

1. Establish yourself as a highly preferred reinforcer.
    a. This means, have ample fun with your student and build a positive, strong relationship. This may take protected time each day to simply play and laugh, with minimal (or no) teacher-directed instructions. Learn what the student loves to do and which activities or tangibles the student frequently seeks out. Make note of all you learn.
2. Conduct one or more preference assessments and continue to do so to ensure effective reinforcers are in place. Some teams require new preference assessments daily (e..g, "what do you want

to work for today") while other teams do so monthly or less. If your student struggles to earn their reinforcer, consider giving another preference assessment with new options to learn more.

> b. The Free Operant preference assessment is one example that can be conducted using the attached data sheet. To use, you will present 6 to 8 reinforcing items/people/activities in a play area on the floor or on a table. During each 10 second interval, mark the number of the reinforcer that the child interacts with (note: there may be more than one). Continue for the rest of the 5 minute trial.
> c. [Free Operant Data Collection Tool](#)
> d. The Six-Item or [Paired Choice Preference Assessment](#) is a second (recorded) example (note: preference assessment variables may be adjusted to meet the needs of your student. For example, your student may need to play with the chosen reinforcer for 20 seconds instead of the recommended 5-10 seconds before moving to the next choice).
> e. [Paired Choice PA Data Collection Tool](#)

"There are three important things to remember about education. The first one is motivation, the second is motivation, and the third is motivation."
Terrell Bell (former U.S. Secretary of Education)

Are you feeling confident with conducting Free Operant and Paired Choice (or "Six-Item") preference assessments and are you ready to learn more? If so, consider connecting with your team to seek out training opportunities, determine who can be trained, and take time to answer the following questions:

1. What bigger picture skill(s) will we teach our student?
2. How many smaller steps are involved in that skill (use task analysis to break down each skill)?
3. What are our behavior objectives (i.e., how will you know when your student has achieved the skill or, in other words, what does that skill look like)?
4. When and where will training occur?

With a trainer, take time to answer the following questions with your team:

5. What materials will be needed?
6. How frequently will we want to conduct a new preference assessment (i.e., does your student frequently show a need for novel/new reinforcers)?
7. How will our team measure progress?
8. What are the steps for teaching the program, and how will the team know when to move to the next step (i.e., determine mastery of criteria)?
9. What will the teacher do and/or say when the student responds to a presented task correctly?
10. What will the teacher do and/or say when the student responds to a presented task incorrectly?
11. How will the team encourage generalization and maintenance of taught skills?

Book Recommendation:
Alberto, P.A. & Troutman, A. C. (2009). Applied Behavior Analysis for Teacher (Eighth Edition). New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.