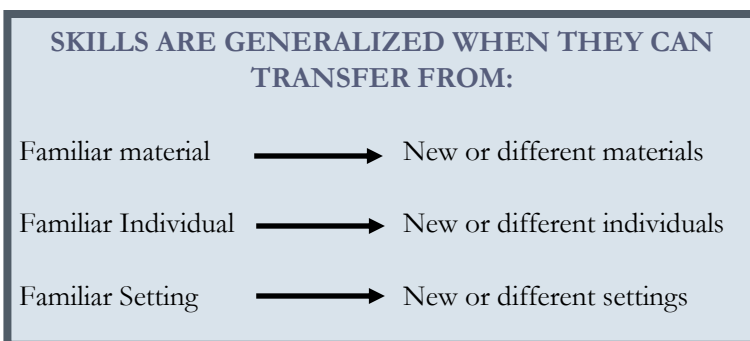# ABA in the Classroom

Generalization

Students often learn a new skill under a certain set of conditions that may include the person teaching them, the materials they use, and the environment where they learn these skills. Generalization is the ability for a student to perform a skill under different conditions (**stimulus generalization)**, the ability to apply a skill in a different way (r**esponse generalization)**, and also to continue to exhibit that skill over time **(maintenance)**. Often students are able to generalize skills both in the conditions under which they demonstrate the skill, and in their responses. Some students however have a greater level of difficulty demonstrating a skill in situations other than the situation that the skill was originally taught. By teaching students to apply learned skills in a wide variety of environments, with various people and varying materials, students can increase their level of independence and flexibility.

STIMULUS GENERALIZATION

Stimulus generalization occurs when a student can perform a skill even when the conditions change. For example, if a student learns how to take turns during a game of Trouble® with two specific classmates in the library, and can then independently take turns playing Sorry® with a sibling at home, the skill of taking turns has been generalized. In this example, the people have changed (classmates to siblings), the setting has changed (school to home), and the materials have changed (Trouble® to Sorry®).

| SKILLS ARE GENERALIZED WHEN THEY CAN TRANSFER FROM:	
Familiar material	➜ New or different materials
Familiar Individual	➜ New or different individuals
Familiar Setting	➜ New or different settings

RESPONSE GENERALIZATION

Response generalization refers to learning a skill and then successfully transferring that skill to similar skills. For example, if a student learns how to zip up their jacket and then is able to zip up their backpack, then the skill of using a zipper has been generalized; or when someone says hello to that student, they can respond with a variety of responses such as "hello", "hi", or "hey".

MAINTENANCE

Maintenance refers to the continued performance of a skill over time once all teaching has ceased (including prompting, specific skill reinforcement, and other applied behaviour analysis (ABA) strategies). For example, when a student is learning to read the word "there", it is still being taught. Once "there" has been learned, if the student is able to read the word independently the following school year, this skill would be considered to be maintained, or generalized over time.

"If generalization did not occur, each response would have to be learned in every specific situation"

- Vaughn, Bos, & Lunc, 1986
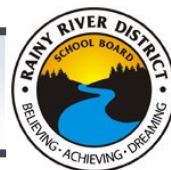
TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING GENERALIZATION

When a new skill is introduced to a student, plans for generalizing that skill can begin to be developed. There are several methods to teach the generalization of skills. The method utilized is dependent on the individual needs of each student., as well as the resources available. Some key methods include:

1. If a teaching program was successful in one setting, implement the same teaching program in a different setting. For example, if a student demonstrates being able to count to ten in one environment, the strategies and supports provided in this setting would be duplicated in other settings. This may also include environmental arrangement, materials and staff.

2. Teach students functional skills, such as asking to get a drink, where the student getting a drink would be a natural reinforcer. If all staff involved with a student learning this skill, respond consistently to this request, the natural reinforcer (getting a drink) will be strengthened, and the student will be more likely to continue demonstrating this skill across people and environments.

3. Once a skill has been demonstrated in response to a specific instruction, begin to change that instruction slightly. For example, if a student learns to identify an item when told, "show me ___", begin changing the instruction. This may include statements such as, "point to the ___", "where is the ___?", etc. In addition, varying materials and staff can be introduced. *(*Note: Change only one variable at a time.)*

4. Once a skill has been demonstrated consistently, begin to thin out how often the student receives social or tangible reinforcement. By thinning reinforcement to a variable, or unpredictable schedule, the student will be more likely to continue performing the skill, promoting skill maintenance.

5. Have students monitor their own behaviour and skills under varying conditions (environment, people, and materials) by documenting their performance.

6. Provide social praise and reinforcement for generalized skills. When reinforcing a skill that is being generalized, staff can reinforce both prompted and independent responses.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING GENERALIZATION

- Teach a skill, whether social or academic, within the natural setting where that skill will be used most often.
- Involve multiple people in the teaching of a skill. This may include support staff, ECEs, other teachers and administrators.
- Utilize the student's strengths when generalizing a newly acquired skill.
- Teach the skill in a variety of settings and gradually introduce new teaching materials.
- As soon as possible, shift from artificial cues to more natural ones.
- Teach different ways of doing the same thing.
- Involve peers.
- Ensure that the school team and home are aware of the student's goals.
- Follow the student's motivation and incorporate their interests whenever possible.

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