9 Pulling It Together in the Neighborhood

Teresa has worked hard to make her home a place where Zena and Crystal, her two teenage children with autism, can learn and still have a lot of fun. She dreads going out into the community, however, because her children find many places too novel and unpredictable. Crystal, who uses speech to communicate, seems readily frightened; Zena, who uses PECS to communicate in short sentences, seems oblivious to danger. Teresa wonders how she will be able to take her children safely into the community while also teaching them the many skills they will need to make a good adjustment into the adult world.

We've discussed several strategies to promote many skills in a variety of situations in and around the home. We will now focus on how you can use these same strategies away from home, when you are visiting your favorite locales in the neighborhood. We will consider recreational activities, shopping and other service-oriented settings, family visits (including during special occasions such as holidays), and some options while on vacation (both at home and while away). We also will review mealtime issues, both at home and out in the community.

Recreational Settings

For your child to fit into recreational settings in the community, he needs to know:

1. how to use community equipment and facilities appropriately;
2. how to play with other children in a way that they perceive as appropriate and friendly.

It may be difficult to combine the two skills immediately, because if a child does not know how to play with something such as a swing or slide, other children may not be interested in playing with him.

Let's look at how you might begin to teach these skills at a community playground. As with teaching other skills, we strongly suggest that when you arrange to teach your child to use the play equipment, you have no other obligations at the time (such as monitoring your other children or wanting to work on interactive play skills). You may even want to arrange to visit the playground when it is deserted to help you and your child focus on the equipment. We also encourage you to use something to motivate your child and permit him to request breaks or help during play time. Remember, although we hope that children will learn to have fun, some may be less than thrilled with their initial lessons at the playground.

To use most types of playground equipment, children need to do many steps in a particular order—such as climb up the ladder, sit down on the top of the slide, let go of the bars, slide down, and land on their feet. As with many other sequential lessons, you may want to start by helping your child fully with the first steps and expecting him to learn to be independent with the last steps. In the case of the slide, you would first remind your child about the potential reward— either how much fun sliding is or perhaps something he will receive when he gets to the bottom. Then, help your child climb up the ladder and get into position on the slide, and finally encourage him to let go. Hopefully, you (or somebody else) will be at the bottom to enthusiastically meet your sliding child! Over time, you will gradually reduce your help in climbing and letting go.

Turn Taking

Once your child has learned all the steps involved in sliding and can do them independently, it is time to teach about turn taking. Your child may have already learned about turn taking while playing at home. For some children, however, the community may be the first

place they need to use this skill. Ask another child (a sibling or relative, perhaps) to play, but be sure to make it clear that your child is just learning to take turns and may appear to be "rude" at first. Be sure to praise both children for taking turns. You may want to encourage each child to communicate to the other child, "Your turn" (regardless of the mode of communication).

For this lesson to be most effective, choose equipment that involves activities that have a clear start and stop point. Using a slide involves climbing the stairs and then sliding down and thus has natural break points. In contrast, if a child can swing by himself, then he can sustain that activity for a long time. You would have to interfere with his swinging to get him off the swings, and that may not be easy to accomplish at first. For the slide, while your child is sliding down, the other child could move to the bottom of the stairs. When your child gets to the stair bottom to climb up again, you can encourage him to communicate that it is the other child's turn, and learn to take his turn after the other child completes his slide down.

During this time, if you have been using any arbitrary rewards for sliding, be sure to try to minimize their use in order to promote the social consequences associated with playing with friends. If your child has learned to use and enjoy other equipment, you may want to build in opportunities for the children to alternate selecting which piece of equipment will next be used.

In general, add only one new piece of equipment on each day of training. Once your child has learned to play on one or two pieces, you can start the playtime with using whatever he likes best before trying to introduce a new play routine. That is, let him use his favorite routine first, then teach him to use some other equipment before letting him return to the one he most likes. In fact, access to a favorite piece of equipment will probably serve as a good reward for learning how to use a new piece of equipment.

Remember that if your child especially likes the playground, at some point you will want to leave! So, do not surprise your child with an announcement that it is time to go home. Set that up at the very start of playtime. You can set a timer or use activity-cards/pictures to indicate when you will leave. For children who like several activities, you may want to use "tickets"—3 tickets for the slides means three rides, 2 tickets on the jungle gym means 2 times climbing all the way around, etc. If your child understands time, then be sure to set the time

before you start to play—otherwise, leaving will seem like a “surprise” to your child and he may not like that. You may want to use a type of transitional object or other visual cue associated with a reward for doing (or starting) the next activity. For example, perhaps your child picked out a favorite audiotape or CD before you left your car to go onto the playground. When it is time to go home, you can take out the tape and give it to your child while he is still on the playground. He’s likely to take you back to the car so that he can listen to his favorite tape!

If you go to a new playground, you may want to determine first which equipment your child knows and likes to use. You also want to assure yourself that the equipment is as safe as what you use in your neighborhood. Some slides are made of plastic derivatives and do not get very hot even in the direct sun, while other slides are made of metal and can become scorching hot. You should also check if there is room around the equipment. Can your child safely walk past other kids who are swinging? Remember, your child is not likely to be as aware of safety issues as you are, so be his eyes when first appraising a new location.

The playground is a natural place to work on communication skills. For example, your child may have difficulty using a piece of equipment or may need a boost to get started. These are great times to work on having him ask for “help.” Of course, if your child is playing with other children, you will want to encourage him to ask for help from his friends. Don’t forget to work on receptive communication skills such as following simple instructions from both adults and children—for example, “Let’s play in the sandbox” or “Hey, give me the shovel!”

While you want your child to enjoy playing with other children, this goal may represent a challenge from his perspective. In this case, asking for a quiet break would be appropriate. You may want to bring a timer to help set limits on alone-play time.

You may want to plan how and where you will deal with inappropriate behavior on the playground. If you use time out at home, then you will want to plan to use a specific location for your TO area in the park—possibly a bench or a spot near a fence where your child can sit quietly for a moment. It is important to plan for problems rather than be surprised if you see actions out in the community that you sometimes see at home. This is also why it is most important to be sure that you have arranged for some powerful reinforcers to be available for your child’s appropriate behaviors as well as support for any communication system that your child uses. For example, if your child uses PECS, then you must

be sure that his communication book and the necessary vocabulary pictures are available at all times while out in the community.

Attending Quiet Events

Teaching children to go to the movies or attend events at places of worship can be tricky because other people usually have high standards regarding proper decorum. First, it is important to separate times when you feel that you *must* go versus times you are attending to teach something to your child. In the second situation, you should be willing to leave if your child cannot handle the entire event, but in the first case, you will feel very stressed if you leave (or possibly very embarrassed if you stay!).

Here is one strategy that we have found effective when we take children with autism spectrum disorders into the community in order to teach a skill. Rather than start the activity the same time everyone else does, do something else with your child at the start (including practicing things that might come up at the end of the activity) and then join the group near the end. This way, your child will only have to successfully participate in some of the event but can enjoy finishing with everyone else. Over time, try to bring your child into the event earlier and earlier.

Before beginning the activity, remember to have your child select something that he would like upon finishing the activity—hopefully, something that can be shared with others, but, if necessary, something that is unique for your child. You may need a visual system to remind your child how long the activity will last. If he can't use a watch or clock to tell time, try a type of token-system using the tokens as markers for the passage of time.

For example, if your child has never been to a movie theater and you are not sure he can sit and watch a 90-minute movie, then be sure to bring some highly motivating items, since you cannot be certain that the movie alone will be motivating. Furthermore, rather than bringing your child into the start of the movie and seeing how long he can last, you may want to bring him in just 15 minutes before the end and then reward him richly for "staying until the end." If he likes popcorn, then you can slowly distribute the popcorn throughout the time that he is watching the movie. The next time you go to the movies, you can try to

have him see the last 30 minutes, then 45, etc. Of course, this is not a natural way to watch a movie, but the point is not to see this particular movie but to teach your child how to successfully "go to the movies." When he learns this skill, there will be plenty of movies that you can watch together from beginning to end!

Since you are going to the movie specifically to learn that skill, if your child acts inappropriately, you can choose to take him out and end that opportunity. Of course, if your child was trying to get out of the theater, then it would be better to teach him to ask for a break. This would allow him to get out for a moment or so, but then return and try to earn the reward you've set up.

There are other places in the community that often require children to be quiet for some or all of the time. Many religious services have noisy periods (e.g., singing) as well as quiet times (e.g., silent devotions). Before attending a quiet event, be sure to consider what type of reinforcing activity your child can engage in while everyone else is being quiet. Food may not be permitted, so you may need to choose other types of rewards, such as coloring or sticker books, or even tokens. It will be helpful to involve the community elders/leaders so they can see that you are trying to establish routines that should ultimately benefit the entire community.

Service-Oriented Settings

Parents frequently must take their children to locations in the community that provide special services—places such as the barber, clothing or shoe store, the library, and various medical providers. Families visit some of these places on a routine basis—such as for a monthly haircut—but others only on an as-needed basis—such as to see the doctor. For these service-oriented settings, it is helpful to plan time to teach your child the routines of the location on a day when you do not really need the services.

Stores

In previous chapters, we discussed strategies for teaching your child about going to the grocery store. Food shopping is something most families do fairly often, so children need to learn how to toler-

ate grocery stores pretty early on. But your child will also eventually need to learn how to behave and what to do at stores that your family patronizes less often—such as clothing or shoe stores.

You may want to take your child to a clothing or shoe store when you do not need to buy something. Just as when you are teaching your child about the playground, you will probably want to arrange to come to the store at a time when not many other people are around. Before entering the store, have your child pick out a reward that he would like. Then choose a very easy goal—perhaps to sit in a chair and simply hold a pair of shoes without even trying them on. Reward your child for a job well done and quickly leave. On the next visit, extend what you expect of your child—perhaps to have one foot measured, for example. Be sure that what you provide as a reward is more important to him than the shoe—if he thinks he gets every shoe he tries on, shopping will be difficult!

Over time, you may want your child to help you determine whether things fit. To begin this type of lesson, you might start with exaggerated errors. For example, have your child try on a shoe that is far small or one that is far too big; a shirt that is too small to even so large that the arms are almost hanging to the floor. Praise your child for rejecting the things that do not fit and for selecting ones that do fit. Of course, if your child has distinct preferences for colors or styles, incorporate choosing things in his favorite color or style into the activity. You may be able to practice some of the activities at home before trying them in the store. For example, perhaps the shoe store manager would lend you a measuring tool. Still, you must remember to use your rewards when you change from practicing activities at home to actually doing them at the store, even if you think your child is comfortable with the routine.

Healthcare Settings

If you are going to the dentist's office—something that you will do many times over the years!—arrange with your dentist for a practice run. One friendly dentist that we know allows the child to simply sit in the chair for the first visit before receiving some type of reward. On the next visit, he tries to get the child to open his mouth and allow him to simply tap—not poke or prod—on each tooth with a pick. He might introduce the child to his equipment. Our friendly dentist uses "Mr. Thirsty" and "Mr. Tickler" as names for the suction device and

the tooth polisher. Over the next several visits, he gradually does more "real" work, but allows the child to stop him by asking for a break. Yes, this process takes some time but most dentists view their contact with a family as something to be cultivated over time and will gladly cooperate if you talk about this strategy. Because you may need several "trial runs," talk to the office about why this is important in the long run so that they won't charge you for each visit!

If your child is comforted at home by "deep pressure"—he likes to wrap himself tightly in a blanket, etc.—have the dentist put the lead apron used during x-rays over your child during the visit.

You may also want to put time into practice trips to the doctor's office— going there, sitting in the waiting area, and leaving without even seeing the doctor. If the visit involves use of something novel, such as a tongue depressor or pressure cuff, try to arrange for an opportunity to use it at home with your child before the doctor or nurse must use it with him. If your child can use a schedule at home, you can bring a mini-schedule to the doctor's office, noting sequences such as:

1. Wait in the outer room
2. Sit in the examination room
3. Greet doctor/nurse
4. Step on scale
5. Have nurse take blood pressure/measure heart rate
6. Doctor looks in ears
7. Doctor looks in mouth and down throat
8. Add as necessary

Note: visits to the barber (or hair stylist!) can likewise begin with short visits aimed at helping your child become acquainted with the setting, the chairs, the combs, brushes, scissors, dryers, and other common equipment before having his hair cut.

Another tricky aspect of many healthcare locales is dealing with the dreaded waiting room. You have a 2 o'clock appointment but you know you will not be seeing the doctor at that precise time. In fact, your doctor is fairly certain of the same fact and has arranged for a separate waiting area—and has placed relatively boring magazines for you to read there if, by chance, you did not bring yourself something to do.

So, since you can anticipate that you must wait, you must anticipate the same for your child. It is not likely that the magazines will be enticing to your child. Many pediatricians have toys in the waiting

room, but these, too, may not be appealing to your child. Therefore, you must bring along something that your child enjoys doing and can engage in while not be highly disruptive to the other people waiting. In Chapter 3, we talked about the importance of the "wait" lesson, and here is where its fruits will be the sweetest! But remember, this is not the location to start the wait lesson since you do not control how long the wait will last and such control is the key to creating a successful lesson. Be sure to have your child select a potential reward before you enter the doctor's or dentist's office area, and make sure it is something you can provide quickly once you leave.

Libraries

Libraries can be interesting community settings for children with autism. Some children like these settings because the expectation is for relatively little communication via talking—being quiet is a virtue here! Of course, for other children, this requirement is a problem, as they enjoy being noisy. If this is the case for your child, then you may want to practice visiting the library when there are few other patrons on hand—perhaps just upon opening.

You may want to work on the initial goals for learning how to use a library just as we described for going shopping. That is, on your first trip, quickly locate and check out one book that you know your child will enjoy and read it as soon as possible. On subsequent trips, gradually spend more time looking for books (including ones that you want) before getting the book that he wants. You can also choose to spend some time using other library resources such as copy machines or computers.

One clever mom hid a McDonald's coupon in a library book and taught her child to quietly search through the pages to find the coupon. Over time, she would give her child more books to look through and occasionally hid other items that were fun for the child but not associated with going out for a snack.

Visiting Family and Friends

Taking your children to visit relatives and other acquaintances can be richly rewarding—or highly stressful! Fundamentally, children will do best when they feel secure and believe that they can trust their

surroundings, including other people. Over time, almost all children can learn that the rules at Grandma's home are different than those at home, but that they are consistent and can be followed. How to reach that point of comfort may involve many steps.

As we've tried to note, children do well at home (and in the community and at school) when they: 1) are engaged in functional activities, 2) have a clear system of reinforcement in place, and 3) have support for their communication skills, both expressive and receptive. If your child has learned to follow a visual schedule at school and at home, then take the schedule with you when you visit other people, indicating what activities will take place, including when you will go back home. (See, for example, Figure 3-2 on page 53.)

If you use a token system for rewards (or a puzzle or point system), be sure to take that with you as well. And if your child uses a visually based communication system (such as PECS or an electronic device) be sure that system is available whenever you leave the house. If your child uses sign language, be sure that you've taught your relatives how to respond to the most important signs. If your child's reinforcement and communication system are available in the new setting, this support will minimize the novel—and thus potentially frightening—aspects of going away from home.

Remember that despite your efforts to calm your child, he might become upset in the new situation. Therefore, plan how (and where) you will give your child an opportunity to take a break (or simply get away) from either specific activities or specific people. That is, if the routines for dinner are new (and possibly slower) than at home, you should allow your child the chance to request a break and be permitted to leave the dining room for a short time. If your child feels there is no escape, then you will see a dramatic escalation of problematic behaviors. For example, if you go to a relative's home for Thanksgiv-

ing dinner, plan for an area where your child can take a quiet break, especially if he is likely to react to the hustle and bustle associated with so many new people around him. You should take care that the food served will not be too novel or that you've brought along some favorites that might help coax your child to sample some new fare.

When we think of visiting our grandmother's, we usually smile in anticipation of all the nice things she will give us, even when we really don't deserve them! You may want to help your child learn how rewarding it can be to visit other people. That is, have the people you visit immediately provide some reinforcers for your child even before putting any demands upon him. If you're not sure they will have things that your child likes, bring rewarding items with you but let them hand the rewards out. In time, you (and those you are visiting) can gradually increase your expectations for your child's participation in various activities and routines, or for simply being polite.

Be sure to bring "filler" activities—things your child has learned to do relatively independently, and, hopefully, with enjoyment. Then, when everyone else is helping to set the table with the heirloom china that no five-year-old should handle, you will have something else your child can do. If you merely hope your child will "stay out of trouble," that expectation is doomed to fail, given enough time!

When visiting someone's home for the first time, be sure to check whether there are any pets that may frighten your child or cause allergic reactions, or that your child may aggravate! If other children will be present, you may want to arrange for some time to talk about your child and any of his unique characteristics. Openness and candor should be the rule, along with high expectations all around.

Routine Visits

If you are visiting relatives or friends and you anticipate that such visits will become routine, then it is important to develop some routines for that location. You may want to consider activities that your child can engage in that require minimum supervision so that you will have time to spend with whomever you are visiting. If these activities require materials not likely to be where you are going, then be sure to take them along.

Let your child know if there are any areas that are "off limits" to him—either for safety or privacy reasons. If you use portable locks to

secure certain areas of your home, you may want to bring some and ask your friends or relatives if you can use them in such special places.

Asking for Breaks. You may also want to designate a special "quiet" area—somewhere that your child can calmly escape to if circumstances become overwhelming (e.g., many unfamiliar guests continue to show up and they're all trying to talk to your child).

One creative mother we knew taught her son Josh to ask for a break at home. He became quite independent at quietly asking for a break when events in the home became stressful for him. His mother created a special "break chair" for him in a quiet part of the house. When his mother took him out in the community, though, Josh didn't seem to generalize this skill to novel environments. Josh's mom thought that this could be because she couldn't take Josh's break chair with her. So, she began putting a bright yellow cloth napkin on the break chair at home, and Josh continued taking breaks at home. Then, when she went into the community, she took the yellow napkin with her, and she made sure that Josh saw her take it from his chair when they left the house. Josh quickly learned to ask for a break in the community, and when he did so, his mother put the yellow napkin down in whatever quiet area she could quickly find, and Josh happily sat on it while he "cooled down."

Video Modeling. To teach your child social skills that would be useful at a specific friend's or relative's house, consider using video modeling, as described in Chapter 5. For example, when Phil went to visit his grandparents, he immediately ran to the video game room. Although his grandparents had set this area up for Phil, they were always disappointed that he did not greet them when he came into their home. His parents decided to videotape a scene in which his brother (playing the role of Phil) greeted their next-door neighbor (playing the role of his grandparents) as he entered the neighbor's house. Next, they taught Phil a three-turn social greeting script, as modeled by his brother in the video, and had him practice this at home. They also sent the script to his grandparents. On Phil's next visit there, his grandparents met him at the door while holding his favorite video game and then proceeded through the script. Phil took his turn appropriately in the script, greeting his grandparents and answering their question about how he was doing. After this "proper" greeting, Phil ran down to play his game.

Scripts. There are a variety of social scripts that may be helpful to your child—in a variety of situations, not just when visiting friends and relatives. A script is like learning the lines within a play. And just

as actors first rehearse their lines before trying them out before the audience, so too would children learn their lines within a role-playing situation before using them in real life situations. How the script is presented will have a great deal to do with your child's skills. Some children can be taught their "part" simply by observing a model and then imitating and repeating what the model did. Other children are able to read, so following a written script can be helpful for them. It also is important to teach children several scripts or different ways to effectively handle a situation so that the outcome does not appear to be too artificial. For example, if you want your child to learn how to respond to questions about seeing a movie, be sure that your child eventually learns to talk about different movies with different people.

Visitors in Your Home. Many parents wonder how they can tell visitors to their home about their child's special needs or traits. Borrowing from a strategy observed at her son's school, Denyse posted a few key reminders under the "Welcome to my Home" sign by her front door. The first asked visitors to look directly at her son when talking to him. The second note asked them *not* to look at her son if he was throwing a tantrum. You may want to similarly post any special instructions you'd like visitors to your home to follow.

Mealtimes

Most of us look forward to a quiet, relaxing meal with the other members of our family. It is a time to share good food and to talk about things that are important within the family or simply just fun to discuss. Unfortunately, mealtimes also can be stressful times for everyone. Some people may feel rushed and ready to move to the next activity, while others may be upset about things that happened that day (or will soon happen) and thus not want to talk to anyone. And some children with autism may not enjoy family discussions or may be distracted by the foods, smells, or routines associated with the meal. What can parents do to minimize stress and promote a relaxed atmosphere?

Learning about Mealtime Routines

Let's first consider routine meals and then we'll consider common exceptions. At breakfast time, everyone is often running around

getting ready for the day and spending little time as a group. Sitting alone and eating a bowl of cereal is a fairly common routine in many families. If this scenario is true for your family, then you may not need to require a great deal of social interaction during the meal. You will want to determine how much of the routine you'd like your child to directly participate in, remembering that the more he gets involved in the routine, the fewer opportunities he will have to engage in inappropriate actions. Depending upon your child's age and skill level, you should expect some participation in some of the routines—for example, taking a plastic bowl from the counter to the table and getting a spoon from the drawer and a napkin from the holder. You may want to speed up certain aspects to help avoid problems—for example, you may want to pour milk from the gallon container into a cup for your child to pour into his cereal bowl or put some cereal into a large bowl for transfer to his bowl (instead of expecting him to handle the large cereal box).

You should consider what else your child can do while eating his breakfast. Will you have time to review his day with him, either by simply talking about what will occur or by reviewing a visual schedule? If you don't have much interaction time, can he look at a book (picture or otherwise) or something else without this interfering dramatically with finishing eating? Remember, it is likely that you do other things while eating your breakfast, such as reading the newspaper or watching the sports review on TV. Thus, it will be important to gradually teach your child about appropriate activities he can do while having breakfast.

Be sure to have your child participate in some manner in cleaning up, even if only to put his spoon in the basket in the dishwasher. If your child has trouble finishing his breakfast within a reasonable time, you can use a timer, clock, or some other visual aid to help him note the progress of time. Of course, when he does finish on time, he should receive some prearranged reward—even if just your joyful praise!

Dinners may be more complex because there may be more social demands associated with having more family members present at this meal. As with all meals, plan which parts of the dinner routine you'd like your child to participate in—from setting up to cleaning up. To prevent your child from developing rituals, you may want to make a visual (or written) chart with many jobs related to dinnertime and rotate through the possible activities throughout the week.

Communicating during Meals

You should expect communication to be part of dinner, with your child expressing himself (using whichever modality) and also listening to others. Everyone needs to learn to ask for and share various common items, from specific foods to utensils and other materials. Remember to encourage your child to initiate communication, not just to respond to or imitate others. Dinnertime is also a great time to encourage communication between siblings, so try to avoid having the parents (or other adults) control all of the interactions. If there are topics you routinely discuss—from what happened at school that day to what the family will be doing on the weekend—then it may help to rehearse these issues/topics before the meal with your child.

Having a visual script (either written or pictorial) may help your child when it is his turn to communicate. For example, the script can contain information about topics that your child can talk about or areas of interest of other people in the group. Perhaps a word or picture will help your child remember that Uncle Bob likes to talk about baseball or that Aunt Sue just took a trip to Australia. The script can also help your child recall interesting things or events that he has recently participated in.

If your child can communicate quite well but isn't sure what to talk about, or if he talks about issues that are inappropriate or just too ritualistic, then you may want to prepare a simple list of topics to discuss during dinner. With such a list, you can also encourage your child to cross out or erase topics that have been covered in order to promote variation both within and across meals. You can also introduce topics that you want to include—upcoming visits to relatives, important events at school such as parties or tests, changes in routines involving visitors to your home, etc. If these types of changes stress your child, you may want to introduce them before the meal so that when they are brought up at dinner time, they are not novel items for him to adjust to while everyone is present.

If your child is stressed by aspects of the dinner—either the social or activity routines—then set up a system to reward him for participating in portions of the meal in such a way that he can tell when the meal will be finished. Be sure to permit him to use some of the critical skills noted in Chapter 3, such as asking for a break or help.

Dinner Guests

Whenever possible, plan for changes in your normal family mealtime routines, whether you have a single guest coming over for one meal or are confronting wholesale changes, such as during holiday dinners. Not only should you work with your child to cope with your dinner guest, but you may want to offer advice to your guest prior to the start of the meal. Bearing in mind what your child likes to talk about, you can offer suggestions on topics that will promote interaction between the guest and your child. You may want to offer advice on whether the style of your guest will fit the style of your child. For example, you can warn Uncle Dave, who likes to slap people on the back as a sign of friendship, that your child tends to react to such contact as aggressive or frightening. You also can find out from your guest some topics she enjoys talking about—what she likes to eat, where she has traveled recently—and prepare your child to talk about these issues.

Eating Out

Going out for a meal can be very stressful for children with autism. From your child's perspective, there may be nothing fast about "fast-food" restaurants, especially at peak times. These locales involve many strangers, from those working at the site to other customers, many of whom will expect some communicative interaction with your child. If your child is very young or appears quite stressed at such places, you should consider going to them only when there are the shortest lines possible. You also should plan what your child will order before getting in line and consider something quick and easy. For example, rather than buying a full meal, just buy some French fries and eat them quickly. Review the routines of different restaurants with your child so he knows what to expect. For example, will your child be handed a drink or will he be given an empty cup to fill? Over time, order fuller meals and visit the restaurant when more people are around.

As noted before, consider the first trips as teaching time, not eating time. If a serious problem arises, end the trip and offer your child something to eat that is less appealing than the fast-food option. Consider what went wrong and then plan accordingly to modify the next outing. For example, if the line was too long, consider reviewing the "wait" lesson. If your child screamed because someone was sitting too

close, either choose a spot further away from crowds on the next trip or offer your child more rewards for tolerating people being close by.

Sit-down restaurants offer different challenges than fast-food places do. For example, rather than ordering at a counter, your child will probably need to communicate with a server and select from a menu. You may want to rehearse these routines at home. Most restaurants will lend you a menu so your child can have an opportunity to review what's on it and how to use it before you enter the restaurant. Plan for what to do during the time between ordering and food being served. What relatively quiet activities can your child do at the table? What will you do if your child eats more quickly than you do? Are there rewards you can offer to your child for staying quietly with you until everyone has finished their meal?

In general, remember that mealtime is not simply food-time. There are many expectations for social interaction during meals and these issues may involve considerable stress for your child, even if he enjoys the food that is offered within the meal. When out in the community, will your child's manner of communication be readily understood by everyone else? Do you have a back-up plan if his communication attempts initially fail? Finally, what rewards will you be able to give your child during the meal and for completing the meal, both at home and out in the community? For some children, simply eating the food will not be sufficiently rewarding to motivate them to use the many skills that will be expected of them.

Going on Vacation

Going on vacation should involve fun and excitement for everyone, and possibly some calm moments as well. Unfortunately, we know of many families who virtually dread holidays and vacations. In our previous examples, we suggested doing "test runs" whenever pos-

sible—arranging for opportunities for your child to learn skills without expecting him to complete everything all at once. The problem with vacations is that there may be no opportunity to practice going to Disney World or a mountain resort. In such situations, it is still important to bring strategies into the novel situations that promote stability and routine—for example, reward systems, schedule systems, other types of communication systems if they are used, and possibly reminders about behaviors you are working on changing (and alternatives).

Whenever possible, try to obtain promotional materials related to where you will be traveling. Review the materials with your child by using visual aids (pictures, videos, etc.), written materials where appropriate, and general discussions. Before the trip, review what special vocabulary you may need—items to request (including novel foods, toys, or activities such as rides), novel things to talk about, including special places (mountains, snow, canyons, etc.), or other novel things your child will experience. Many amusement parks and other well-organized attractions promote special conditions for those with disabilities, especially if you contact them ahead of time. These may include passes to circumvent long lines, or even a special guide to help everyone enjoy the events.

Whenever you go to new locations, be sure to plan for the unexpected. That is, talk to everyone in the family about what to do in case of emergencies such as injuries, someone getting lost, or your child having a temper tantrum. In the midst of a chaotic and scary situation it will be difficult to calmly think of a plan. Be sure to secure identifying information with your child, something that someone else (including the police) would quickly find if your child is not able to fully communicate about the situation. Whether such information is on a card inside a wallet or on a bracelet or necklace would depend on what you know about your child's tendency to remove such items. To counter these tendencies, give your child frequent praise and rewards for having the ID on at all times in the community. And remember that your child may not be able to produce his best skills if the situation is stressful; thus, always have a backup plan. This information should include a way to contact you as quickly as possible (as via a cell phone, for example).

We recommend teaching children to remain still if they get lost. After all, it will not be helpful if your child is trying to find you while you are trying to find him. You also will have to make decisions about what you want your child to do if he becomes lost and someone else

approaches him—should he talk or should he continue to wait for someone he recognizes? As with any skill, you should arrange to practice what to do if your child gets lost while you are in a safe environment. For example, when you have several people with you to assure safety, abruptly walk away from your child in a supermarket (with both ends of the aisle monitored) and reward your child for standing still until you return. If he tries to walk out of the aisle, try again but with a shorter interval of time for him to wait for your return. If you think your child will understand a story about dealing with being lost, you may want to read it with him to help him learn how to handle the situation.

Dealing with Holidays

Dealing with holidays can be stressful, even if your family is staying at home. Routines change, people come and go—including people your child may rarely see—strange food, costumes, customs, and other alterations become the rule rather than the exception! The key to helping your child cope with these novelties is to take advantage of calm times to teach better tolerance for change. If you put all your effort into maintaining a fixed routine virtually all the time, when change comes—and it must!—your child will not have the skills to manage it in a calm fashion.

Many of the communication skills described in Chapter 3 will hold the key regarding how well everyone will deal with holidays. For example, in the section on teaching children to follow schedules, we noted the importance of teaching the concept of "surprise." If you've spent time teaching this as part of your everyday routine, you'll find many opportunities to inform your child of surprises throughout any holiday. Likewise, being able to ask for a break will be important when your child is overwhelmed by sudden changes or the introduction of new foods, activities, or people.

Giving and receiving gifts is a part of many holidays, and you can anticipate that your child may not like everything he receives. You should not expect to teach your child how to deal with being disappointed by a gift in a room filled with your relatives. Instead, you can help prepare your child for this possibility by offering him surprise "gifts" within your normal home routines, being sure to include some duds! In this way, not only can your child be taught how to say, "Thanks!" for

well-appreciated gifts but he can also practice how to politely (though less enthusiastically!) say, “Thank you!” for any gift.

Many holidays involve wearing special clothes, whether it is a Halloween costume or a shirt, jacket, and tie or a fancy dress. Have your child wear these unique items at times prior to the required time and you will have a better chance at rewarding him or her for tolerating the new attire.

We should also recognize that during holidays parents have many responsibilities—from preparing and setting out food, to talking to relatives and friends, to helping older relatives who need more attention. All of these factors will tend to decrease the amount of time and attention you will be able to devote to your child. How will he react to this change? To help your child cope when you cannot devote a lot of time to him, plan to provide him with access to a variety of reinforcing activities and materials that he can use independently.

You also should be sure that your child can tell you directly if he really needs more attention from you. This type of communication is important for all children, though the message may vary according to the child’s overall communication level. For example, a young child might say (or use an equivalent picture to say), “Come play with me!” If you are concerned that your child may ask too often, then you can limit the number of requests by using a count-down visual system. For example, you may give him five “play with me” cards to use for a holiday party. Children with more sophisticated communication skills can be taught to say, “I know you’re busy but can we do something together soon? I’m getting a bit anxious!”

Review

In this chapter, we have used examples of routines that your family may use at home, in your neighborhood, and in the general community. All of the ideas that we have introduced via the Pyramid Approach now become integrated to best help your child with autism effectively cope with many different situations. To successfully teach your child in these varied settings, you must focus on functional activities using powerful rewards (as natural as possible) while assuring that your child has a set of critical functional communication skills (regardless of the modality he uses to communicate). In addition, you

must handle any problematic behaviors by first addressing their cause and then identifying appropriate replacement skills.

Conclusion

After reading the preceding chapters, you should understand how to decide upon the type of lesson involved within any activity. You should be able to choose a teaching strategy to match that lesson and later promote its expansion into other settings. You should also understand the importance of responding to your child's errors in a planned and consistent manner. Finally, you should now know how to collect information that will help you decide whether your teaching plans have been successful or whether you need to make some adjustments.

At this point, you should have the knowledge you need to teach your child with autism in many settings and circumstances. When you encounter problems and challenges, you can return to the elements of the Pyramid Approach to find a potential solution in a systematic fashion. We know that you will feel great pride as you watch the growth of your child in and around your home!