



Companion Teaching Manual II

# **Deciding What to Teach**

Selecting a Curriculum  
for Children with Autism  
and Children with  
Developmental or  
Intellectual Disabilities

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To Teachers, Curriculum Coordinators,  
Speech-language Pathologists, and Behavior Analysts  
who are struggling with this issue...

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In recent years, teachers, curriculum coordinators, speech-language pathologists, and behavior analysts have struggled with **what to teach** children with autism and children with developmental or intellectual disabilities. Four factors have contributed to this struggle: (1) the insistence of many states that instruction for all children, including those with disabilities, be guided by the Common Core State Standards or similar state-mandated, academic standards, (2) the expectation of parents and professionals that many children with autism, if provided with early and intensive intervention based on the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), will *catch up* to their typically-developing peers and become candidates for inclusion in formal, academic instruction in regular classrooms, (3) the realization that many children with autism also have moderate-to-severe developmental or intellectual disabilities and, while intensive, behavior analytic intervention can result in an improvement in their skill repertoires, it does not result in repertoires that closely resemble those of their typically-developing peers or that prepare them for academic instruction, and (4) the failure of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board to include any tasks in the recent editions of their Task List (which informs their certification exams) regarding the selection of curricula or types of skill repertoires to guide and include in intensive behavior analytic intervention (ABA).

This manual will describe six types of curricula — Developmental, Pre-academic, Academic, State-mandated Academic Standards, Functional Skills, and Specialized, which type is appropriate for learners with specific skill deficits and learning histories, and when a curricular change for these learners may be indicated:

(1) **Developmental Curricula**, including...

*The Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP)*

*The Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS-R)*

*The Early Start Denver Model*

*A Work in Progress*

*Developmental curricula* are designed for young children between the ages of two and eight who are described as having *significant language delays, language disorders, or autism*, and who present with developmental or pragmatic delays in language and social skills that inhibit effective communication and interaction with adults and peers (see the diagram on page 4). *Developmental curricula* are not designed for children who present with mild language delays that inhibit the learning of academic skills. *Developmental curricula* are also not designed for children with moderate-to-severe intellectual disabilities, such as, Down Syndrome, Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, Microcephaly, or Angelman Syndrome, or children with significant and pervasive skill deficits not associated with specific syndromes, as these disabilities inhibit not only the learning of language and social skills, but also many other skills of daily living.

*Developmental curricula* are based on typical language and social skill development in young children and are designed to help children with autism or children with significant delays in these skills *catch up* to their typically-developing peers. As long as young children with these delays continue to make steady progress, decisions regarding *what to teach* them should be based largely on these curricula. Evidence of this progress should include:

*improved expressive and receptive language skills,  
increased matching and imitation skills,  
generalization across situations, settings, and people,  
along with, the emergence of novel responses,  
complex discriminations,  
answers to questions,  
conversation, and  
abstract concepts.*

The most innovative and comprehensive developmental curriculum available today is *The Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program: The VB-MAPP*.

<http://www.marksundberg.com/vb-mapp.htm>.

This instrument provides an assessment of developmental and pragmatic delays in language and social skills and also functions as a curriculum for remediating those delays.

*As shown in the diagram on page 4, when young children between the ages of four and eight, whose instruction has been guided by a developmental curriculum, acquire the language skills typical of a four or five-year-old child (e.g., most of the skills on level 3 of The VB-MAPP), their instruction should now be guided by a pre-academic curriculum, which will prepare them for formal, academic instruction.*

*As again shown in the diagram on page 4, when young children between the ages of six and eight, including many children with autism, do not experience steady progress on a developmental curriculum described on the previous page, even after several years of intensive, behavior analytic intervention (ABA), and continue to present with substantial language delays (e.g., skills deficits in levels 1 and 2 of The VB-MAPP), their instruction should generally be guided by a functional skills curriculum, rather than a developmental one. When families struggle with this change in expectations, it is often advisable to begin teaching both developmental and functional skills and gradually moving to more functional ones. The instruction of children with autism or significant language delays, who have reached the age of eight, and adults with autism or these same language delays, should not be guided by a developmental curriculum, except in very unusual circumstances.*

(2) **Pre-academic Curricula**, including...

*Language for Learning*

*Language for Thinking*

*Pre-academic curricula are designed for young children who are described as having language delays and who present with mild developmental or pragmatic delays in language which inhibit the learning of academic skills (see the diagram on page 4). Pre-academic curricula can be used effectively with young children with autism or significant, developmental or pragmatic delays in language and social skills only if these delays are overcome with a developmental curriculum and intensive, behavior analytic intervention (ABA). The most well designed and empirically validated pre-academic curricula available today are *Language for Learning**

<https://www.mheonline.com/directinstruction/language-for-learning/>

*and *Language for Thinking*.*

<https://www.mheonline.com/directinstruction/language-for-thinking/>

*As long as children continue to make steady progress on pre-academic curricula, decisions regarding what to teach them should be based largely on these curricula.*

*Pre-academic curricula are not designed for children with moderate-to-severe developmental or intellectual disabilities.*

(3) **Academic Curricula**, including...

*Reading Mastery*

*Distar Arithmetic*

*Academic curricula are designed for young children who present with deficits in fundamental reading and math skills which inhibit the learning of additional academic skills. Academic curricula can be used effectively with young children with autism or significant, developmental or pragmatic delays in language and social skills only if these delays have been overcome with a developmental curriculum and intensive, behavior analytic intervention (ABA), and these children have made significant progress in a pre-academic curriculum.*

As long as children continue to make steady progress on academic curricula, decisions regarding what to teach them should be based largely on these curricula.

The most well designed and empirically validated academic curricula available today are Reading Mastery

<https://www.mheonline.com/onlinesamples/program.php?subject=1&program=10&p=2>  
and Distar Arithmetic.

<http://www.mheducation.com/prek-12/program/MKTSP-UUA02M0.html>

As shown in the diagram on page 4, when children between the ages of four and eight do not make steady progress on these curricula, their instruction should be guided by a developmental or a functional skills curriculum.

Academic curricula are never appropriate for children with moderate-to-severe developmental or intellectual disabilities.

(4) **State-mandated Academic Standards**, including...

*The Common Core State Standards (CCSS)*

*Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)*

*Sunshine State Standards and Common Core (The Florida Access Points)*

State-mandated academic standards are appropriately applied only to children with language, social, and academic skills that are typical for their chronological age.

These standards are often imposed inappropriately on children with autism or children with significant, developmental or pragmatic delays in language and social skills. These academic standards should only guide the instruction of these children if the delays in language and social skills have been overcome with a developmental curriculum and intensive, behavior analytic intervention, and these children have made significant progress in a pre-academic curriculum.

In many states within the United States of America, these standards have been imposed inappropriately on children with moderate-to-severe developmental or intellectual disabilities. These standards, however, are not designed to remediate the skill deficits exhibited by these children and should never be permitted to guide their instruction.

(5) **Functional Skills Curricula**, including...

*Essential for Living (EFL)*

*The Functional Independence Skills Handbook (FISH)*

*The Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS)*

Functional skills curricula are designed for children and adults of all ages who present with specific developmental or intellectual disabilities, such as, Down Syndrome, Microcephaly, Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, or Angelman Syndrome, or children and adults with significant and pervasive skill deficits not associated with a specific syndrome, or children and adults with autism and one of these disabilities or these skill deficits (see the diagram on page 4).

These individuals have limited repertoires of language, social, daily living, and tolerating skills, do not easily acquire matching or imitation skills, experience only limited generalization across situations, settings, or people, have difficulty making even simple discriminations, and find most formal, academic skills meaningless and difficult to acquire.

As shown in the diagram on page 4, functional skills curricula are also appropriate for young children between the ages of six and eight, including many children with autism, who continue to present with significant language delays (e.g., skills deficits in level 1 and level 2 of The VB-MAPP) even after several years of intensive, behavior analytic intervention (ABA).

The most innovative and comprehensive functional skills curriculum available today is *Essential for Living*.

<http://www.essentialforliving.com>.

*Essential for Living* provides an assessment of pragmatic deficits in language and social skills, along with deficits in daily living, leisure, functional academic, and vocational skills *that matter in everyday living*. This instrument also functions as a curriculum for remediating these deficits. And, *Essential for Living* provides a systematic procedure for selecting and confirming an alternative method of speaking for non-verbal learners.

(6) **Specialized Curricula**, including...

*Mobility Opportunities Via Education®/Experience (MOVE)*

The *MOVE curriculum* is an example of a specialized curriculum, which was specifically designed to help children and adults with limited gross motor skills and limited mobility to improve sitting, standing, walking, and transitioning.

<http://www.move-international.org>

The *MOVE curriculum* is a comprehensive and innovative curriculum, and the only one of its kind.

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