

A Letter from Martha Gabler: Writing from the trenches of the autism war...

I believe TAGteach has tremendous potential in helping children with autism, particularly in helping parents manage the often difficult behaviors of these children. I am the parent of a 10-year old boy with severe autism who is non-verbal. Since learning about TAGteach approximately 1 ½ years ago, his behaviors have become much more manageable. Here are some of the reasons I love using the TAG, and some of the ways I have used it:

Reasons for liking TAGteach –

First, of all behavioral interventions generally available, TAG is by far the least expensive! We all know how much an ABA program costs, however, with a \$1.35 tagger and a pocketful of candy treats, almost anyone can do positive behavioral intervention. Just read the back of the tagger: it says "TAG, don't nag," and this is all you need to do!

Second, anyone can learn to TAG a child with autism in about 5 minutes: just watch the child, wait for him/her to do ANYTHING positive (turn towards you, touch a toy, touch a book, stand nicely, sit nicely, jump on the trampoline, open a door, look at the ringing phone, say a word), then TAG and treat. What a great way to supervise a child! So quick, so simple, so easy to teach to a teenage babysitter or (if you are really lucky) a relative or friend who is willing to help you with your child.

Third, TAG gives parents a strategy for managing a child during those many, many times when we have to deal with truly horrible, unimaginable behaviors.

Examples of how I have used TAGteach--

I have used TAGteach successfully to teach my child to go on long walks, navigate through parking lots, go to the grocery store, fall asleep at night, and reduce verbal stimming. Here are some brief descriptions of how I did these things:

Long walks: My son could not participate in the very simple activity of taking a walk around the block. He would take one step, then dart off in any one of several different directions, take another step, dart off, and so on-- very difficult to manage in the street. I started tagging and my first TAG point was "takes two steps in same direction." Every time, by chance, that he took two steps in the same direction, I tagged and treated. Soon he was doing two steps in the same direction, then three steps, and then more. After a while, I could take him for long walks around the neighborhood -- no more darting around. Now, I can take him on 5 mile (yes, mile) hikes with a local hiking club and he enjoys them very much, walks very well, and does just fine.

Navigating through parking lots: The simple act of getting from the car to the store can be a nightmare for autism parents. After I got my son to the point where he could walk nicely (see above), I started working on having him stay right by my side. At this point he was good at walking with me, so I just added a signal (waved

my hand by my side) and said "walk with me." I practiced this during our walks and every time he walked right next to me I signaled, said "walk with me" and tagged and treated. Now he is very good about staying with me when he goes through parking lots.

Going to the grocery store: Well, once autism parents have had the hair-raising experience of making it through the parking lot, they have to get their child through the grocery store, hopefully with no tantrums or disappearing acts. The grocery store used to be a high-blood pressure experience for me, but after using TAGteach, things improved dramatically. As soon as we were in the store, I had my son "help" me push the cart, and the constant tag point was "hands on the cart." When his hands were on the cart, he got tags and treats. This helped tremendously. He learned to stay with me and the cart, he got to pick out a special treat (always easy to do in the grocery store!), and we now usually have good, easy times in the store. If I had to do it over, I would specifically take time out to train good grocery store behavior, and be more structured about teaching him to stop and start the cart on command. Also note: my husband pointed out that my son is great when you are shopping with a cart, but when they were recently in a store that does not use carts, he had problems with my son running down the aisles. This would be a good time to reinforce the "walk with me" tag point mentioned earlier.

Falling asleep at night – Night time and sleeping are huge issues for many autism parents. From age 2 ½ to age 5, my son was up every night for two to three hours. After age 5 he started sleeping through the night again, but occasionally we have some wake-ups or he might have a hard time getting to sleep. This is what I do now (and I wish I had known about TAGteach when he was younger): When my son wakes up or can't settle down and starts that horrible nighttime behavior that all autism parents dread of shrieking, bouncing on the bed, banging, the blinds, etc., I use the TAG concept of marking the behavior I want and reinforcing it. Before, I used to go into my son's room and try to calm him down (thus reinforcing bad behavior). Now, using TAGteach, this is how I handled this problem: I stood outside his bedroom door and waited for any kind of diminution of the bad, noisy behavior. The split second that he stopped shrieking or jumping, I went in and gave him a little pat and a kiss, then left the room immediately. As soon as he was quiet again, I went in again and gave him another little pat. After a while, he understood that he got Mom's attention by being quiet and still, and he started becoming more quiet and still, and eventually fell asleep. The first time I tried this tactic it took about 3 hours for him to get back to sleep and it was very tiring for me, but after that it went quicker. Now at night, I could not use the tagger, because it was too loud and disruptive for the rest of the family, but my son's bedroom door was very creaky, so opening the door at the exact moment that his behavior changed served as our "tag" (or "creak"). To anyone trying this, I would recommend using a small flashlight. The moment the child pauses with the noise or jumping, flash the light, then go in and give a little pat or hug. The light can "mark" the behavior for the child at night as effectively as the click of the tagger. Of course, use your judgement. Sometimes the child really needs to be comforted and sometimes the child can be sick, upset or over-tired. We can now put our child to bed pretty easily most nights and he almost always sleeps through.

Verbal stimming – This can be a huge problem for autism parents. My son did some verbal stimming, but not very much, so it was not a huge problem for us, more an occasional and annoying event. This problem is very easy to manage with the tagger, the tag point is “quiet mouth.” The split second the child pauses, or even lessens the volume when stimming, just tag and treat. My child was very quickly offering me “quiet mouth” behavior, and we have very little trouble with it.

Non-verbal Interaction – Many children with autism, sadly, have limited verbal abilities. With the tagger, you can communicate very closely with your child in a different way and build those communication channels. Autism parents are very aware of their child’s sensory issues and that many environmental factors that are routine to us (light, noise, wind, smell) can be overwhelming to our kids. However, I don’t think we are all aware that emotions can be equally overwhelming to the child; this includes the child’s emotions as well as the parents’ emotions. Many people believe that children with autism “withdraw” from the world, yet I personally believe that these children may be trying to regulate their personal emotional state in response to the emotions of the people around them. Since they take in much more emotional information from those around them than we do, they may back away to reduce high-intensity, perhaps even painful, interaction. If you have a child who has limited verbal abilities and limited interaction, TAGteach is a great way to communicate with your child on a different level.

Here is an example of how you could use TAGteach with such a child at the playground. Now the playground can be a very high stress environment for a kid with autism -- lots of loud, shouting, running kids, lots of strange contraptions, and your own parents who are urging you to climb up that scary ladder and go down a slippery slide. Armed with your tagger and treats, start tagging every single “good” muscle movement that he/she makes. Child looks at slide, TAG! Child takes a step, TAG! Looks at bird, TAG! Turns (even partially) toward you, TAG! Puts his foot on a step, TAG! Reaches for a bar, TAG! After a while, the child will calm down because he is being reinforced for whatever he is doing, no one is pushing him to do things that are scary, and he can begin to rely on the clicking sound for information. Karen Pryor writes very eloquently about how the tagger is far superior to the human voice in conveying information to a learner because the click sound does not carry all the pesky emotional information that is embedded in a human voice. With no emotional input to deal with, the child can focus on what he/she is doing and learn that putting his feet on the first step of the ladder will earn lots of tags, and maybe going up another step will continue to earn tags. This is a great way to calm the child, encourage him/her to explore, and it eventually becomes a communication medium between the child and the person doing the tagging. This type of interaction opens the way to communication. I have even had my son come over and tag himself if I have forgotten to tag him for something good that he has done – it’s as though he is saying, “hey Mom, I did this great thing and you forgot to tag me!”

In conclusions, TAGteach has helped us manage some very difficult behaviors, and I firmly believe that it has huge potential to do even more for our kids – we just have

to be diligent and creative about using this wonderful method. Even more important than the specific behavior issues noted above, the whole TAGteach methodology can quickly give parents (who are usually not board-certified behavior analysts) an effective and inexpensive way to look at the child's behavior and think about reinforcing whatever positive actions that child is doing, and stay focused on reinforcing good behavior. Once parents have this concept, they can more easily deal with the many distressing behaviors that our kids with autism exhibit.

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