



## Steps to Independence: Teaching Everyday Skills to Children with Special Needs, Fourth Edition

By Bruce L. Baker, Alan J. Brightman

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Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. That's an important job—and this popular, highly respected guidebook makes it much easier. A trusted resource for thousands of families, this lively book gives parents of children from age 3 through young adulthood proven strategies for teaching children the life skills they'll need to live as independently as possible. Parents will start with a reader-friendly overview of the basics of teaching and then go deeper with a step-by-step guide to teaching seven different types of skills: get-ready, self-help, toilet training, play, self-care, home-care, and information gathering skills. In this fourth edition, they'll also find helpful updates and additions, such as

- an expanded section on managing behavior problems, including guidance on identifying the problems, examining behavior, initiating a behavior management program, and encouraging alternative behaviors
- a chapter on technology that reflects recent advances and shows how to benefit from using email, instant messaging, Internet communities, search engines, and software
- a chapter on strengthening partnerships with other teachers in the child's life during IEP meetings, through classroom volunteer work, and in everyday communication with them

Based on years of work with parents and laced with humor, helpful illustrations, and vignettes, this is a must-have resource for families and all professionals who work with them.

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### **Editorial Review**

#### Review

A wonderful book that breaks down skills . . . into manageable steps. Really helps us develop the building blocks towards independent living. --Susan Fitzgerald

#### About the Author

Alan J. Brightman, Ph.D., Founder, Apple Computer's Worldwide Disability Solutions Group, Saratoga, CA. Dr. Brightman created Apple Computer's Worldwide Disability Solutions Group as well as the Teenage Division of AT&T labs. He received his doctorate in education from Harvard University and received an honorary doctorate in science from the University of Massachusetts. He has produced a wide variety of media to combat the stereotypes associated with children with disabilities and children with chronic illness. Presently a private consultant working with education organizations around the United States, Dr. Brightman has served on the Board of Directors of Steven Spielberg's Starbright Foundation as well as Microsoft's Access Advisory Panel. He lives in Northern California with his wife, Melissa, and their two teenage sons, Alex and Jesse.

Bruce L. Baker, Ph.D., has been Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, since 1975, where he formerly chaired the clinical psychology program and presently conducts research on the development of mental disorders in young children with developmental delays. Dr. Baker received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Yale University in 1966, then taught at Harvard University for 9 years. During his career, he has developed many intervention programs for children with mental retardation and their parents. He is presently a consulting editor to five journals concerned with mental retardation and/or families, and he is involved with a number of professional and service organizations that focus on children and families. Dr. Baker lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Jan, and their two children.

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### **Setting Out**

The 21st century is truly a new era for children with special needs, a time when parents and professionals together determine the educational course of each child. It is an era, too, in which the roles of parents and professionals require them to reconsider their individual responsibilities. Who decides what a child will learn? And who takes action to see that the learning happens? Simply stated, this new era for children with special needs requires parents to reexamine what it means to be a parent and requires teachers to reexamine what it means to be a teacher.

### **PARENT ROLES**

There is no one "correct" approach to reexamining roles. Teaching is a natural part of being a parent. Virtually every time you interact with your child, you are teaching him or her something — whether you realize it or not. Many parents of children with special needs have decided to become more intentional teachers; some parents are conducting daily teaching sessions in their home. Other parents, after considering their full range of responsibilities at work and/or at home, have realistically decided that an everyday

teaching role would be impractical. Their teaching will have to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves throughout the day or on the weekend. In either case, the child gains, particularly when the parents have participated actively with their child's teachers in shaping an individualized education program (IEP). We talk more about working with your child's school in Chapter 20.

## **GOOD TEACHING**

One of our basic assumptions in writing this book was that no matter what decisions you may have made about your role as a teacher, you will be better able to fulfill that role if you understand firsthand what good teaching is all about. Put another way, once you know how to teach your child a skill systematically — from beginning to end — and once you know how to manage behavior problems, then you will be a much better collaborator with others in your child's educational world.

A related assumption is that the only way to learn about good skills teaching is to do good skills teaching. Of course, you have already taught your child many skills. (Take a minute and think about all of the things your child has learned to do with your help.) For most readers, this book primarily will strengthen teaching skills they already have and suggest new ways to use them. But whether or not you have been teaching already in the systematic way we suggest, while you read this book we urge you to find some time, somehow, during which you will teach your child another new skill. We're not suggesting that you find additional teaching time to spend with your child. We're simply suggesting that you take some of the time you already spend and direct it toward what we believe will be a rewarding and long-lasting experience for you both. Like most parents, you'll probably be delighted at how good you are at teaching. But, just as important, you'll be much better prepared to be a partner on your child's educational team.

## **PHILOSOPHIES AND FADS**

"Okay," you might say. "Teaching certainly makes sense. But there seem to be a lot of ways to go about this. What's the approach in this book, and how do I know whether it will work?" Good questions. The disability field has more than its share of different approaches, each with very vocal cheerleaders. It is very difficult to be an informed consumer, to separate the various philosophies about education for people with developmental disabilities from sound evidence about what works.

Because we want to help children with intellectual and related disabilities, we are particularly aware of new fads and philosophies. Some of these will be found to have merit and will survive to become the common practices of tomorrow. Others will fade, to be replaced by whatever next new trend is rounding the corner. For example, a philosophy that is guiding educators' thinking today is full inclusion — the proposition that all children with special needs should be educated entirely within the general education environment. This is an extreme outgrowth of earlier philosophies, such as integration, mainstreaming, and normalization, which argued that opportunities for children with special needs should be as close as possible to those for typically developing children. These earlier ideas turned out not to be passing fads but perspectives that have become widely accepted, not so much because they were demonstrated to "work," but because they seemed to many of us to be the right thing to do.

Other philosophies and fads have not fared so well. Have you heard of patterning? Megavitamin therapy? Additive-free diets? Facilitated communication? Each of these offered new hope to parents and absorbed immeasurable amounts of time and money, only to finally be discarded from the weight of professional opinion and scientific studies that failed to document success.

Be assured that the teaching techniques in this book are based on principles of behavior change, primarily those of applied behavior analysis, which educators have known and practiced for decades. They have been derived from thousands of published studies of effective teaching, as well as from the shared experiences of

countless parents and teachers. These behavioral teaching principles have become an integral part of effective school programs.

Although most educators would generally agree with the broad teaching principles we employ, there is one point with which some will disagree. Some educators argue that teaching should always be done informally, in the child's natural environment and within ongoing play and living activities. Other educators point out the benefits of separate designated teaching sessions in which the teacher repeatedly practices a skill with the child. Our opinion is . . . well, it depends. There is good evidence that both approaches are successful, and a blend of the two approaches is likely best for most children. You will decide how closely to follow the specific teaching programs that we suggest and how much to adapt them to provide teaching moments throughout your child's day.

## **YOU'RE THE EXPERT**

A final point before we — and you — get started. It's an obvious point, perhaps, but one that hundreds of parents reminded us could not be made too often. Though you may be the parent or teacher of a child with special needs, you are unlike any other parent or teacher of such children. You are uniquely you. You have your own dreams and visions, your own wants and needs. And in one essential way, you have a kind of information that no one else could possibly have: You know your child more intimately than anyone else.

We ask you, therefore, as you begin this book, not to think at all about trying to change who you are. Rather, add to what is uniquely you a new set of skills and, perhaps, a new way of looking at your child, to become an even more substantial partner in building his educational future. Much of what we say here may not seem all that new to you; perhaps you've already used a version of the techniques we describe. It is our hope, though, that this book will help you to build on these experiences so that you can do what you are doing even better. Remember: Keep your expectations high — for both you and your child.

Chapter 2 gets you started on the road to becoming a successful skills teacher. But before jumping in, let's take a moment to look at one parent who's already been traveling that road for some time. The teaching program you're about to glimpse will, on the surface, seem fairly simple. But the strategies behind it were carefully developed and practiced in ways that you'll learn about in the following chapters.

Excerpted from chapter 1 of **Steps to Independence: Teaching Everyday Skills to Children with Special Needs, Fourth Edition**, by Bruce L. Baker, Ph.D., & Alan J. Brightman, Ph.D., with Jan B. Blacher, Ph.D., Louis J. Heifetz, Ph.D., Stephen R. Hinshaw, Ph.D., & Diane M. Murphy, R.N.

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