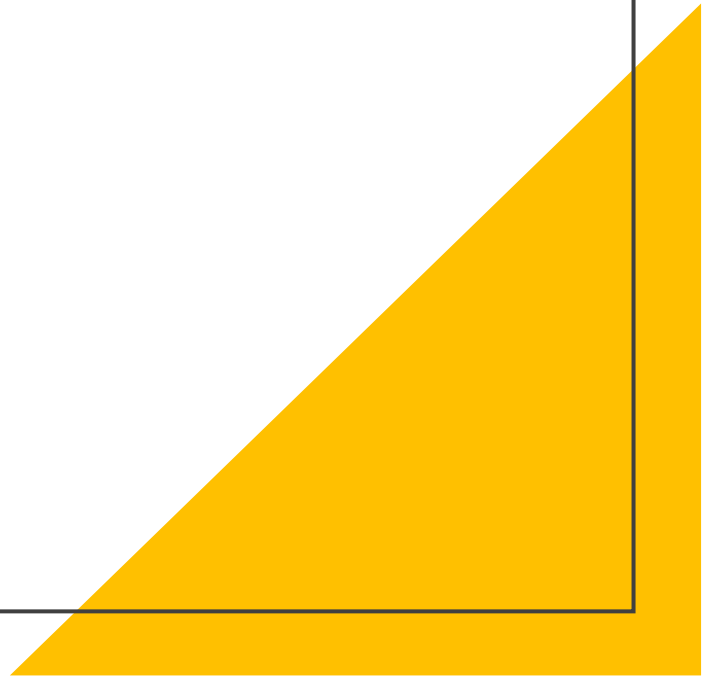


# Teaching Functional Communication

**Presenter:**

**Sarah Coughlan**

**Learning Specialist: Autism Learning Partnership**



# About me

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- BSc and BEd from Acadia University
- MEd in Curriculum and Instruction from University of New Brunswick
- Graduate Certificate in Behaviour Analysis from Florida Institute of Technology
- 18 years in high school setting
  - 10 years: Classroom Teacher
  - 8 years: Education Support Teacher-Resource
- Learning Specialist for the Autism Learning Partnership: Branch of the Education and Early Childhood Department in New Brunswick
- Enjoy reading, the outdoors, listening to live music & watching my sons play hockey

# Objectives:

What is functional communication?

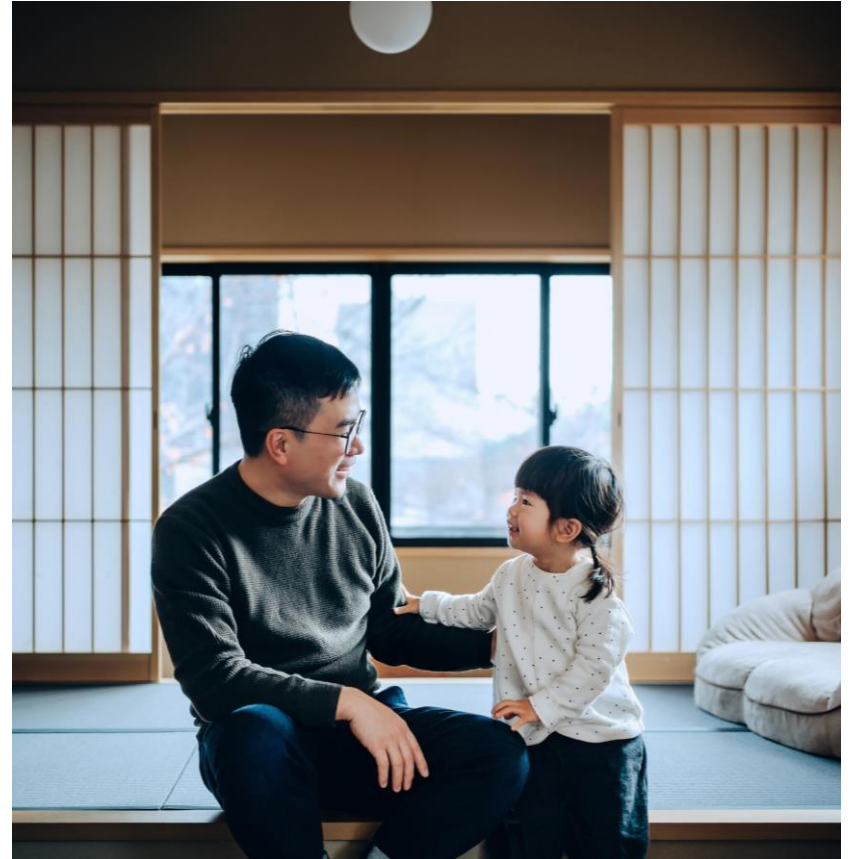
Why should we prioritize teaching functional communication skills?  
What are the benefits?

How do we implement Functional Communication Training (FCT)?

# What is Functional Communication?

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- Practical means for learners to express their wants and needs in socially acceptable and effective ways
- Various forms: vocalizations, sign language, Augmentative & Alternative Communication methods (pictures, communication boards, Proloquo To-Go)
- Challenging behaviour is communication, just in a maladaptive way





# Case Study

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- Liam                      Grade 2
- Has limited spontaneous expressive communication. Reliably uses 1-2 words and gestures to express wants and needs. Receptive communication is strong.
- Whines and engages in physical aggression (hitting, pushing, kicking) about 3–5 times per day

# Functional Communication Training (FCT)

- Approach developed by Carr & Durand 1985
- Evidence-based intervention (Hume et al, 2021)
- Based on established Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) practices
- Identifies the **function** of the challenging behaviour (Functional Behaviour Assessment: FBA)
- Teaches and then replaces challenging behaviours with more appropriate and effective communicative behaviours, while still meeting need of identified **function**
- Enables student to get their needs met, minimizing instances of challenging behaviour

# What are the benefits of teaching functional communication skills?

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Reduces  
challenging  
behaviour

Increases  
independence

Improves social  
interaction

Greater access to  
learning  
opportunities

Generalization of  
skills for life  
outside of school

Self-advocacy  
and safety

Reduces  
caregiver stress

# STEPS OF FCT

1. **Complete** a Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA)
2. **Identify** a more appropriate way for the learner to communicate wants/needs
3. **Teach** the replacement behaviour by **prompting** the learner to use the Functional Communication Response (FCR) when appropriate.
4. **Reinforce** the use of FCR.
5. **Minimize or remove** the reinforcement for the behaviour of concern occurs.
6. **Implementation and Monitoring:** Train staff, collect & analyze data, and plan for next steps

# 1) Complete Functional Behaviour Assessment

1. **Operationally define challenging behaviour**
2. Collect baseline data
3. Assessment:
  - Indirect- Interview
  - Direct- Observation
4. Analyze data to identify function

# Results of Liam's FBA: Operational Definitions

**Physical aggression:** any instance where Liam makes forceful physical contact with another person using his body. This includes:

- Hitting: striking another person with an open hand, typically directed to the person's upper torso, arms, head and face)
- Kicking: forcefully extends one or both legs and uses feet to make physical contact with another person, including forward, sideways, or backward leg movements
- Pushing: using hands when arms are extended resulting in visible movement of the other person or an observable attempt to move them.

**Whining:** a vocalization produced with a high-pitched and drawn-out tone, accompanied by elongation of the "Ah" sound.

# 1) Complete Functional Behaviour Assessment

1. Operationally define challenging behaviour
2. **Collect baseline data**
3. Assessment:
  - Indirect- Interview
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4. Analyze data to identify function

# Results of Liam's FBA: Baseline Data

| Time:            | Dates  |            |            |            |            |
|------------------|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|
|                  | 27/10/2025   | 28/10/2025 | 29/10/2025 | 30/10/2025 | 31/10/2025 |
| 8:00am- 8:30am   |  |            |            |            |            |
| 8:30am- 9:00am   |  |            |            |            |            |
| 9:00am-9:30am    |  |            |            |            |            |
| 9:30am-10:00am   |  |            |            |            |            |
| 10:00am-10:30am  |  |            |            |            |            |
| 10:30am-11:00am  |  |            |            |            |            |
| 11:00am-11:30am  |  |            |            |            |            |
| 11:30am-12:00am  |  |            |            |            |            |
| 12:30am-1:00pm   |  |            |            |            |            |
| 1:00pm-1:30pm    |  |            |            |            |            |
| 1:30pm-2:00pm    |  |            |            |            |            |
| 2:00pm-2:30pm    |  |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Frequency</b> | 5  | 3          | 3          | 5          | 4          |
| <b>Comments:</b> | Liam makes whining noises <u>before</u> he engages in physical aggression. The whining happened very time except when the physical aggression happened multiple times during an interval |            |            |            |            |

# 1) Complete Functional Behaviour Assessment

1. Operationally define challenging behaviour
2. Collect baseline data
3. **Assessment:**
  - **Indirect- Interview**
  - **Direct- Observation**
4. Analyze data to identify function

# Results of Liam's FBA: Indirect Assessment

Caregivers report that Liam will whine and then push them when they preparing dinner in the evenings. When he does this they will typically turn their attention to him and ask him what he wants.

They also noted that Liam will start whining in the morning right after breakfast. If they ignore the whining, he will kick and slap them. They report that they will often give him his ipad after he does that to calm him down so they can get his siblings ready for school.

**Open-Ended Functional Assessment Interview**  
Developed by Gregory P. Hanley, PhD, BCBA-D (2005)  
Formatted by Joshua Jessel, PhD, BCBA-D (2016)

## Step 1: Basic Information

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Child/Client: \_\_\_\_\_

Respondent: \_\_\_\_\_

Respondent's relation to child/client: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

### RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. His/her date of birth and current age: \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_ yrs \_\_\_\_ mos

Male/Female

2. Describe his/her language abilities.

Non-verbal

1-word utterances

Short disfluent sentences

Full fluency

Comments:

What are the problem behaviors? What do they look like?

Aggression

Disruption

SIB

Other

Comments:

What is the single-most concerning problem behavior?

# Results of Liam's FBA: Direct Observation

| Date/<br>Time               | Antecedent<br>What happened immediately before the behaviour?   | Behaviour<br>What did the student do?                         | Consequence<br>What happened immediately after the behaviour?  | Notes  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| October 27, 2025<br>9:36am  | Student was directed by EA to stand in line with classmates- waiting to go outside for recess         | Kicked peer who was standing beside him                       | EA who was helping another student came over when heard peer yell "Ow Liam kicked me!" EA immediately gave verbal reprimand to Liam ( <i>Liam we don't kick our classmates</i> ) | Liam can independently put own boots and coat      |
| October 28, 2025<br>9:55am  | Liam was swinging on swings outside during recess   | Whined and then kicked peer who was swinging beside him       | Staff member who was on duty observed the kick, came over to see if peer was hurt and then said to Liam " <i>Kicking hurts our friends! No kicking</i> "                         | Whined for approx. 1 minute before kicking student |
| October 29, 2025<br>11:45am | During lunch time in the resource room, Liam was walking back from putting his lunch box in his cubby | Whined and then pushed EA on lunch duty when he passed by him | Second EA on duty observed this, approached Liam and said " <i>Liam are you all done your lunch? Here is your iPad</i> ", and gave him his iPad                                  | Whined for approx. 45 sec before pushing           |

# 1) Complete Functional Behaviour Assessment

1. Operationally define challenging behaviour
2. Collect baseline data
3. Assessment:
  - Indirect- Interview
  - Direct- Observation
4. Analyze data to identify function

# The Functions of Behaviour



Attention



Escape or  
Avoidance



Access to  
an object  
(Tangible)



Automatic/  
Sensory

# Results of Liam's FBA: Analyze data to identify function

| Antecedent  | Behaviour   | Consequence   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>When....</b><br>Caregiver or school staff member is not in direct proximity to Liam, is engaged in another task, or is diverting their attention elsewhere | <b>Liam engages in...</b><br>Whining and physical aggression (kicking, pushing and hitting) | <b>To...</b><br>Access attention from caregivers and school staff |
| <b>When....</b><br>Transitioning between activities or tasks  |   | <b>To...</b><br>Access his ipad                                   |

The function of Liam's challenging behaviour is to access adult attention and tangible (ipad)

# STEPS OF FCT

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2. Identify a more appropriate way for the learner to communicate wants/needs

**FCR=Functional Communication Response= The Replacement Behaviour**

**Function** of the replacement behaviour must be the same as the function of the challenging behaviour

### **Considerations:**

- **Form of communication:** based on the student's current communication skills, abilities and needs
- The **effort** it will require the student to produce the FCR should be **less than** behaviour of concern
- **Collaboration with caregivers and school staff**

# Replacing Liam's Challenging Behaviour

| Challenging Behaviour         | Function   | Possible Replacement Behaviour (FCR)   |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Whining & Physical Aggression | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Access to staff attention</li><li>- Access to iPad</li></ul> | <p><i>Watch me!</i></p> <p><i>Ipad</i></p> <p>Teach the use of a requesting system</p> |



-- Watch Me



Ipad

# Examples of FCRs by Function

## Attention



Am I doing good work?  
Talk with me!  
Play with me.  
Watch me.

## Escape or Avoidance



I don't understand.  
Can I have a break?  
Help, please.  
Can I have 2 more minutes?  
Less work?

## Access to an object (Tangible)



*Item name*  
Can I have.....  
I want.....

## Automatic/Sensory



Speak quietly.  
I need to move.  
I want my headphones.  
Squeezes.

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### 3. Teach the replacement behaviour

## Teaching Methods could include:

- Behaviour Skills Training (BST)

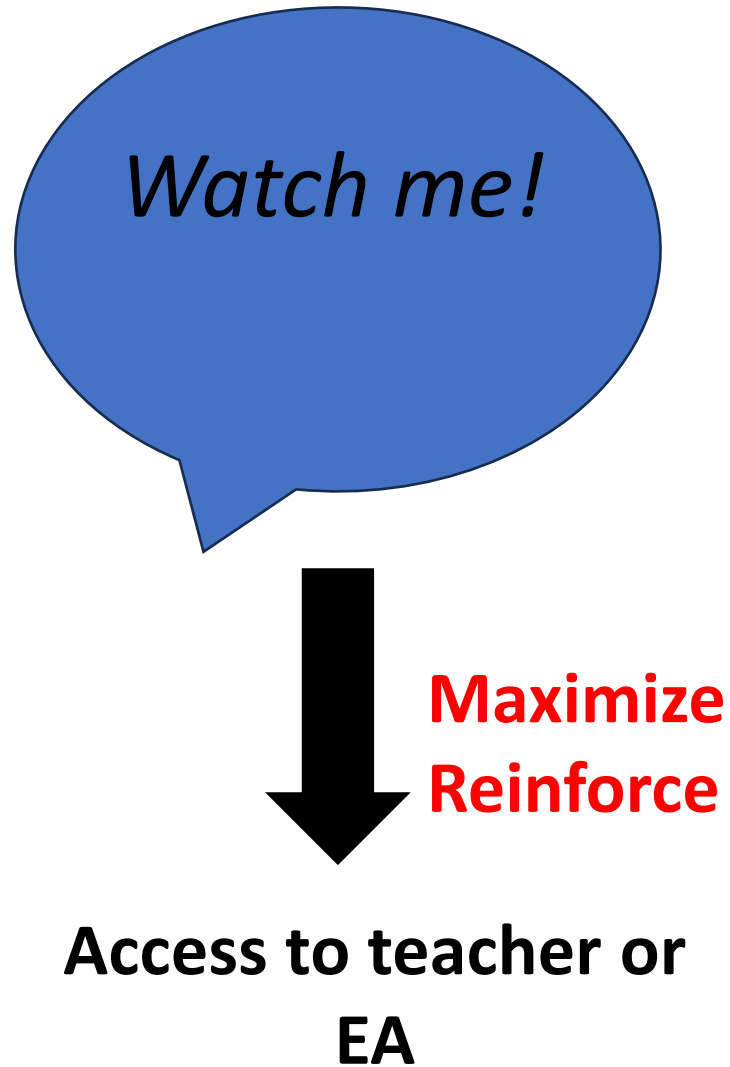
Tell → Show → Practice → Feedback

- Social Narratives or Power Cards
- Modelling (Videos)

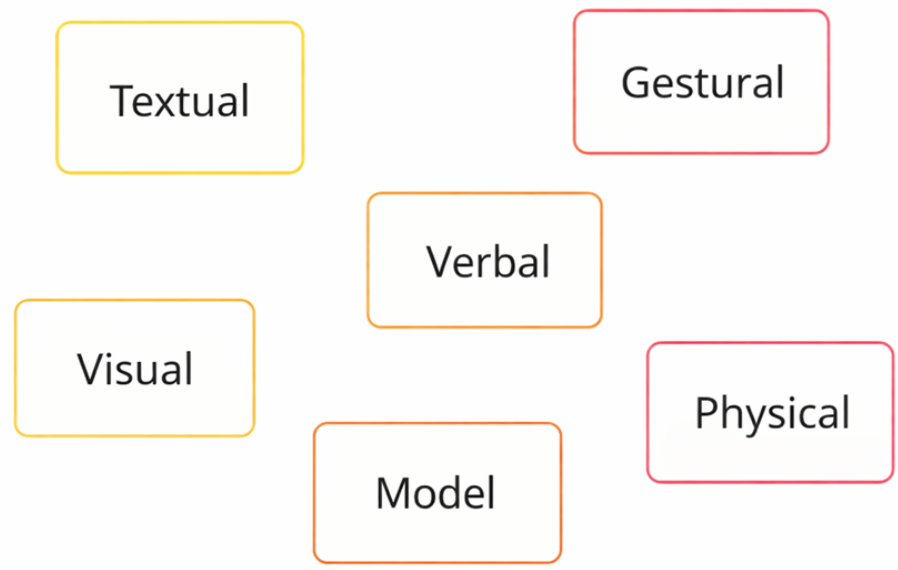


-Plan for Generalization

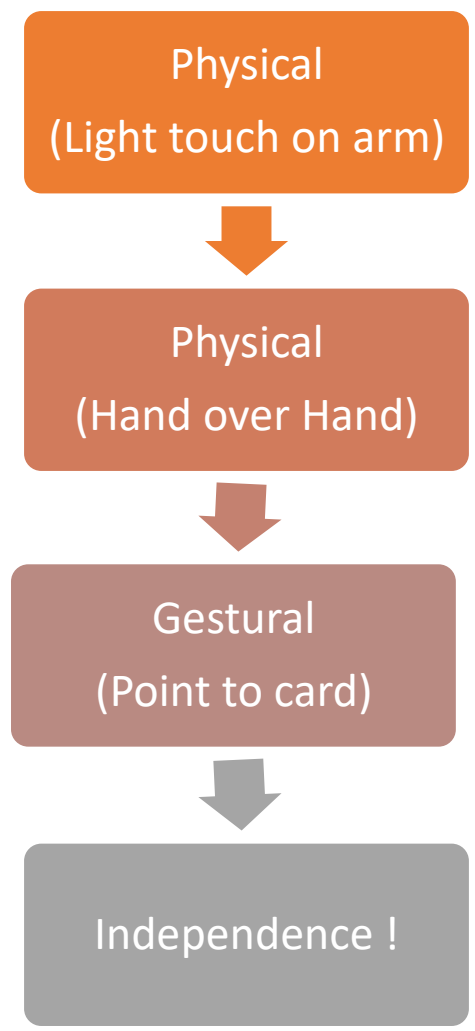
The key to FCT:  
Differential  
Reinforcement



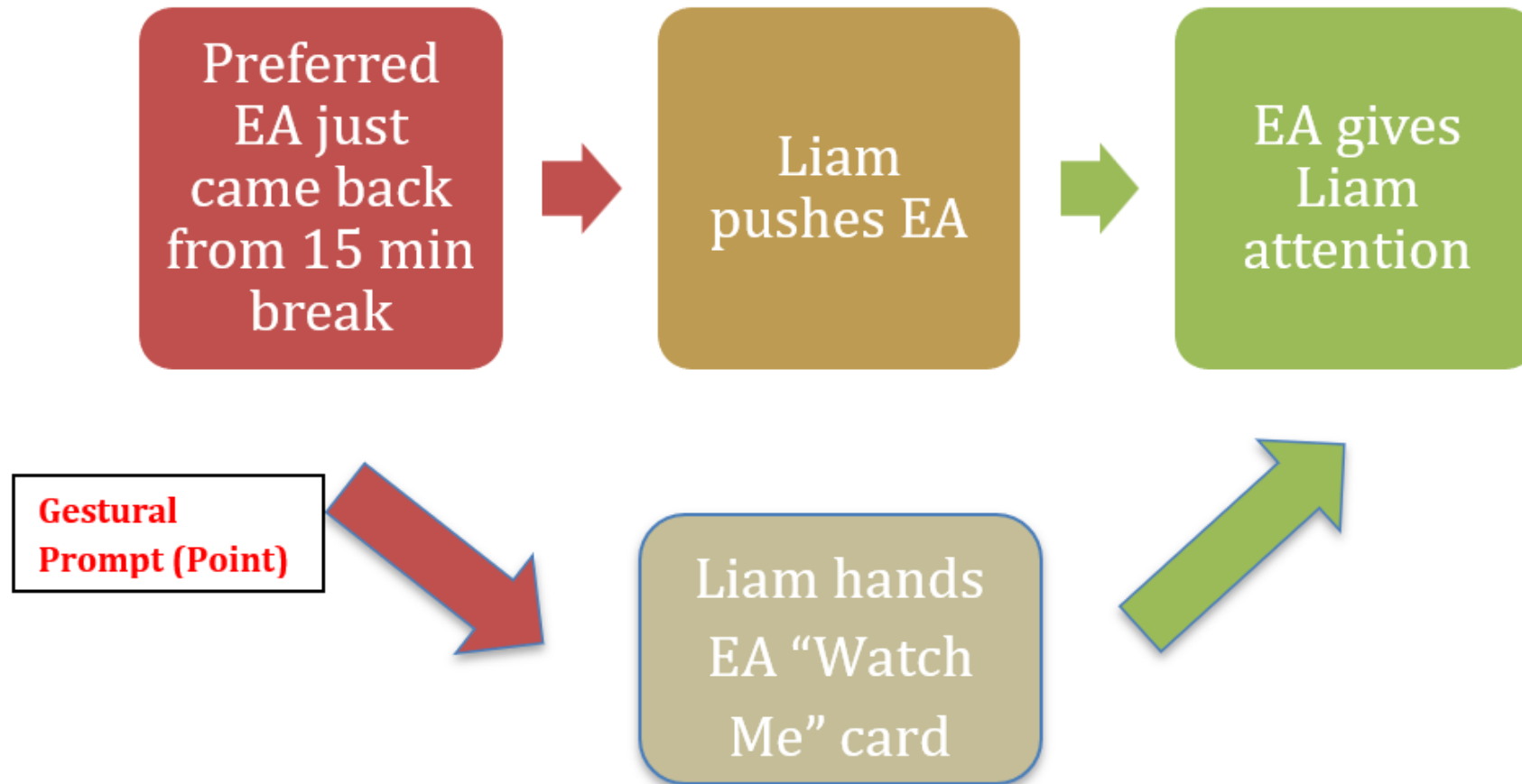
### 3. Teach the alternative behaviour by prompting the learner to use the FCR when appropriate



- Most-to-least prompt hierarchy
- Gradually fade out prompts



### 3. Teach the alternative behaviour by prompting the learner to use the FCR when appropriate



# STEPS OF FCT

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## 4. Reinforce the use of the FCR



Reinforce the FCR  
immediately and each time  
it's used by providing the  
student what they asked for

Request ipad → ipad  
provided

## 4. Reinforce the use of the FCR

### Initially

Reinforce FCR consistently and frequently (every time they ask)

### Thin Reinforcement

Gradually increase the interval of time between student's FCR and the reinforcing response

Teaches student to wait

# STEPS OF FCT

- ✓ **Complete** a Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA)
  - ✓ **Identify** a more appropriate way for the learner to communicate wants/needs
  - ✓ **Teach** the replacement behaviour by **prompting** the learner to use the Functional Communication Response (FCR) when appropriate.
  - ✓ **Reinforce** the use of FCR.
5. **Minimize or remove** the reinforcement for the behaviour of concern occurs.
  6. **Implementation and Monitoring:** Train staff, collect & analyze data, and plan for next steps

## 5. Minimize the reinforcement of the challenging behaviour

- **Minimize access/size of reinforcement for the challenging behaviour if the challenging behaviour occurs without FCR**



# What do if the challenging behaviour occurs?

**Minimize access to the reinforcer as much as possible**

→ Don't give Liam the ipad when he kicks

**Immediately prompt the FCR or attempt to prompt the FCR**

→ Put a picture of ipad in front of Liam and point to it

**Reinforce by providing them what they were asking for**

→ Give Liam ipad when he points to ipad picture



Watch for precursors  
!!!!

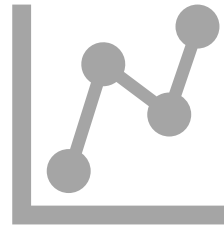
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# Implementation and Monitoring: Train staff, collect & analyze data, and plan for next steps



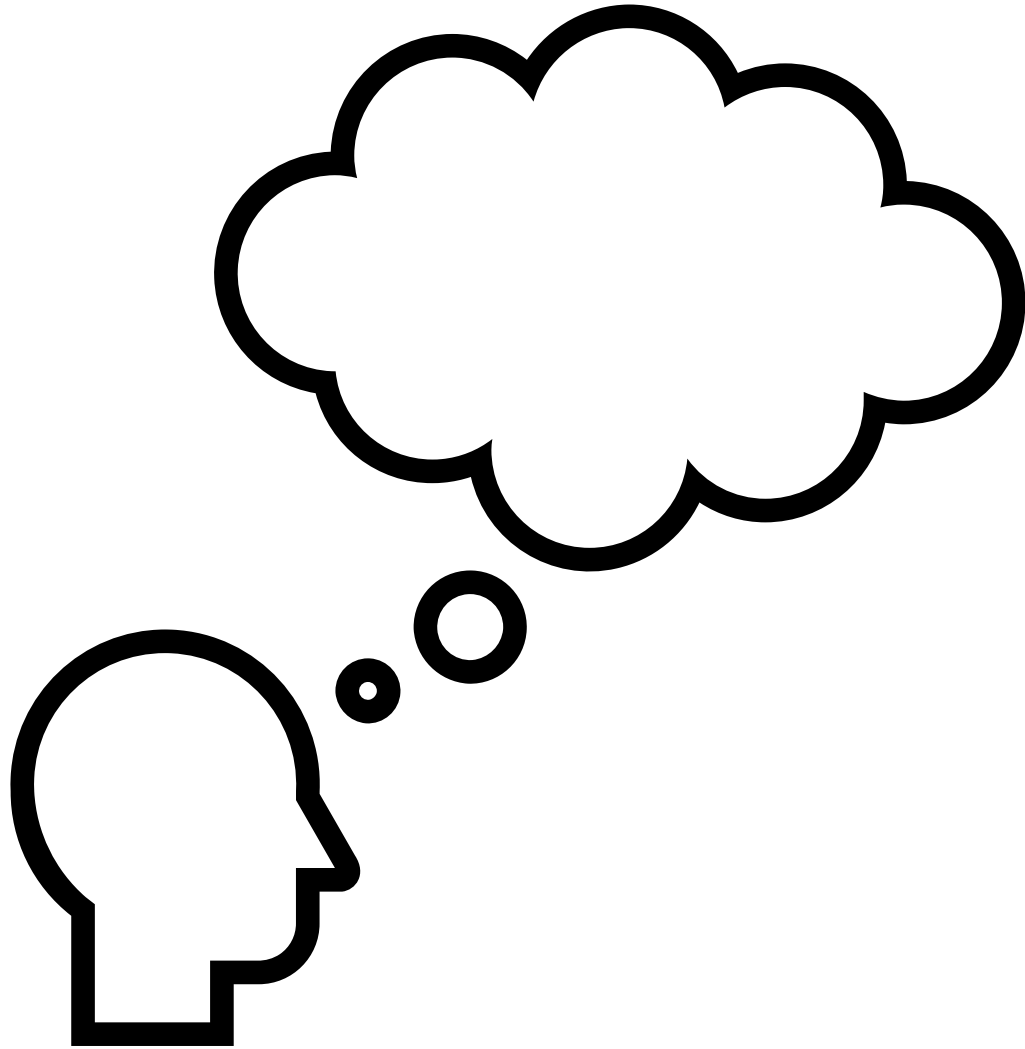
**Staff training: BST & Monitoring  
Implementation Fidelity**



**Collect and analyze data on  
replacement behavior (FCR)**



**Determine next steps based on  
learner progress**



# A final thought



How can we proactively  
prioritize teaching  
functional communication  
skills so students can  
express their wants and  
needs without having to  
engage in challenging  
behaviour in the first place?

# Thank you!

Have questions? Reach out!

Resources available through Autism Learning Partnership:

- <https://alp-paa.com/en/resources>
- <https://www.youtube.com/@autismlearningpartnership4009/videos>

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