

# The Foundational FIVE

Evidence-based practices (EBP) are strategies proven effective through research and practical application. The Foundational Five are EBPs that can make the most significant impact for students with autism. These practices are powerful on their own and complement each other, creating a comprehensive framework for providing effective and individualized instruction. While the Foundational Five represent just a portion of the broader range of evidence-based practices available, they serve as building blocks for implementing other strategies and can be used across settings.

Let's take a closer look at each of the Foundational Five EBPs, along with practical examples of how to apply them in a school setting.



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Autism Center for Education

## ● *Antecedent-Based Intervention*

Also known as ABI, these are strategies that set someone up for success. ABIs are put into place in **advance** to boost student engagement and prosocial behavior. Well-implemented ABI can promote positive classroom climate and foster inclusion by:

- Creating predictability
- Adding structure
- Increasing motivation
- Clarifying behavioral and academic expectations

**Examples:**

- Set up the classroom environment to support understanding of expectations and boundaries. Designate work spaces for specific activities, provide a cozy corner for a sensory break, and label bins so students know where to access classroom materials.
- Offer choices to the learner to increase motivation throughout daily activities. During independent work, let the student choose which task they want to complete first.
- Embed motivators into the day by incorporating student interests and preferences in learning materials. Allow students to select reading and journal assignments based on their interests.

## ● *Reinforcement*

Reinforcement is anything provided or delivered **after** a behavior that increases the likelihood that the behavior will happen again. It can include praise, acknowledgement, access to a preferred item, environment, activity, or even tangible rewards like a paycheck. Reinforcement must be meaningful and individualized. What motivates one student may not motivate another. When used correctly, reinforcement strategies strengthen the behavior and help build skills.

**Examples:**

- A student walks to the library independently, and upon arrival, the librarian provides behavior-specific praise, saying, "Great job walking safely in the hallway," and gives him a high five.
- After finishing a math worksheet, a student gets 5 minutes of computer time, linking effort to a preferred activity.
- A student earns a sticker each time they complete their morning routine independently. After collecting five stickers, they choose a small prize, reinforcing consistent participation in the routine.

## ● *Systematic Instruction*

Useful for teaching any skill, systematic instruction begins by breaking down skills and information into smaller pieces. Each piece is then taught in a logical, step-by-step manner, progressing from simple to more complex. Teach each step individually using modeling, visual supports, and practice before expecting students to complete independently. Using a systematic teaching approach makes data collection more efficient, helping educators clearly track progress and identify areas where additional support is needed.

- Examples:**
- Teach reading comprehension by breaking it into steps: preview the text, identify the main idea, highlight supporting details, and summarize. Use graphic organizers and practice each step before combining them.
  - Teach the plant life cycle by introducing each stage separately: seed, germination, growth, flowering, pollination, and seed dispersal. Use diagrams, sequencing cards, and hands-on planting activities to reinforce each step before connecting them into the full cycle.
  - Help students estimate task duration by teaching them to break assignments into smaller steps. Model using visual timers, checklists, and guided practice to build time awareness and planning skills.

## ● **Social Communication Instruction**

Social communication skills are critical for participating in instruction, building relationships, and engaging in everyday activities. All students need a way to effectively express needs, wants, and ideas, whether by using speech, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) supports, or a combination of both. Creating a communication-rich environment gives students regular chances to interact with peers and adults, helping them grow their social, verbal, and nonverbal communication skills.

- Examples:**
- Use role play to teach and practice a variety of conversational skills (e.g., initiating, maintaining, and terminating a conversation) for common scenarios at school, such as asking a teacher for help or ordering lunch in the cafeteria.
  - Integrate AAC instruction throughout the day by consistently modeling language on students' communication supports.
  - Have students collaborate to practice turn-taking, listening, responding, and teamwork to complete a group project.

## ● **Visual Supports**

While everyone learns differently, research shows that individuals with autism often excel as visual learners. Visual supports are a powerful tool when teaching new skills or reinforcing existing ones. They promote independence and reduce reliance on verbal prompts. Visuals can be used to support each of the 4 strategies above!

- Examples:**
- Placing a visual schedule on the classroom wall or a student's desk helps them anticipate and prepare for the day's activities, which is a proactive **ABI** that uses a visual support.
  - Using a 'first/then' card to show a student that, after morning circle time, there will be a break to play on their tablet is one way you may use a visual for **reinforcement**.
  - Writing out the steps to hand-washing and posting them near the sink can support the **systematic instruction** for this multi-step task and help students follow a consistent routine to build the skill.
  - Before beginning a board game, review a social story with students to reinforce key **social communication** skills such as taking turns, waiting patiently for others, and using appropriate signals to indicate when their turn is over.

**Resources:** NCAEP Evidence-Based Practices for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Autism:  
<https://ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/EBP-Report-2020.pdf>

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[vcuautismcenter.org](http://vcuautismcenter.org)

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