

Early Childhood Preference Assessments

Reinforcement is a powerful tool that can support learning for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Reinforcing a child with items they like or prefer can motivate young learners to complete tasks and learn new skills. Evidence-based preference assessments can help families and providers to identify motivating items or activities that support learning.



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● Preference Assessment Defined

A preference assessment is a way to determine what the child likes and how much they like it. Preference assessments may be informal (such as observing the child in the natural environment) or may be structured (such as a trial-based preference assessment). When several items are presented together, a formal preference assessment can identify a hierarchy of what the child prefers. Highly preferred items can be used to help teach difficult skills, including new social, language, and academic skills, while less preferred items can be used to help maintain a mastered skill.

New or Difficult Skill

Learned Skill

Highly Preferred Item

Less Preferred Item

● Getting Started

Preference assessments can be conducted by anyone who knows the child! Family members, caregivers, teachers, support staff, and related service providers can complete preference assessments.

Begin with a free operant observation by:

1. Talking to families and caregivers to find out what the child prefers at home.
2. Placing items such as toys, games, and other materials around the room.
3. Observing and noting the items and activities they interact with and how long they play with them.

****During this kind of observation, toys or items are never taken from the child, and adult interaction should be kept to a minimum.***

If the child seems to enjoy six items (e.g., a toy bus, dog stuffed animal, Koosh ball, fidget toy, light-up wand, and mini bubble machine), those toys can be used to conduct a paired-choice preference assessment.

● Conducting a Paired-Choice Preference Assessment

A paired-choice preference assessment identifies a hierarchy of what the child prefers. Rather than just placing all the items out on the table, this assessment limits each trial to just two items.

Prepare for your paired-choice preference assessment by creating a chart with all the items that will be used, pairing them together in random order for 15 trials. Be sure that each item is paired with all other items at least once.

Paired-choice preference assessment chart should include:

1. the number of trials
2. the items you are presenting
3. the side on which the item is presented (right or left)

****Noting the side of presentation is important because a child might simply be picking an item because it is closer to their dominant hand. If you notice that the child always chooses items on the same side, try changing the placement of that item to the other side of the child.***

Your Paired-choice Preference Assessment Chart might look like this:

Trial	Right	Left	Trial	Right	Left	Trial	Right	Left
1	Stuffed dog	Bubble machine	6	Toy bus	Bubble machine	11	Light up wand	Toy bus
2	Fidget toy	Light up wand	7	Toy bus	Koosh ball	12	Koosh ball	Light up wand
3	Koosh ball	Fidget toy	8	Stuffed dog	Light up wand	13	Bubble machine	Fidget toy
4	Light up wand	Bubble machine	9	Fidget toy	Toy bus	14	Koosh ball	Bubble machine
5	Stuffed dog	Fidget toy	10	Koosh ball	Stuffed dog	15	Toy bus	Stuffed dog

Begin the paired-choice preference assessment:

1. Place the two items in your chart on a table or hold them up in front of the child.
2. Give the child an opportunity to select one of the items from the pair.
 - a. The child may select the item by reaching for it, pointing to it, using AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication), or by looking in the direction of the item (eye gaze).
3. Let the child play with the selected item for 10-15 seconds and remove the other item.
 - a. While the child is playing, circle which item was selected in that trial.
4. After 10-15 seconds, gently remove the item.
5. Quickly present the next pair of items.
6. Repeat this cycle until all trials have been completed.

****Note: If the child does not indicate a choice or make a selection after presenting the two items for 5-10 seconds, then move to the next pair and do not circle either item on the chart.***

Sample Results:

Trial	Right	Left	Trial	Right	Left	Trial	Right	Left
1	Stuffed dog	Bubble machine	6	Toy bus	Bubble machine	11	Light up wand	Toy bus
2	Fidget toy	Light up wand	7	Toy bus	Koosh ball	12	Koosh ball	Light up wand
3	Koosh ball	Fidget toy	8	Stuffed dog	Light up wand	13	Bubble machine	Fidget toy
4	Light up wand	Bubble machine	9	Fidget toy	Toy bus	14	Koosh ball	Bubble machine
5	Stuffed dog	Fidget toy	10	Koosh ball	Stuffed dog	15	Toy bus	Stuffed dog

The results of the example trials demonstrate the highest preferred item is the light-up wand (chosen 5 times) and the least preferred is the stuffed dog (chosen 0 times). The most preferred items should be considered by family members or providers to help motivate the young child to learn more difficult or new skills. If aiming to maintain previously learned skills, then less preferred items could be utilized.

● Troubleshooting

Item no longer appear to be a preference?

For a child whose preferences seem to change frequently, a preference assessment may need to be completed daily or before each lesson. Preference assessments can be completed as often as needed to determine the strength of motivators used to support the child's learning.

No clear preference?

Don't worry if a clear hierarchy is not identified during your trials. There are additional types of preference assessments that can be completed other than the paired-choice preference assessment. These types of preference assessments typically take more time to complete and require more materials; however, the information gained may be helpful to those supporting the child's social, communication, and academic growth. If you need more information, please contact VCU-RRTC-ACE at autismcenter@vcu.edu.

● References

Lill, J. D., Shriver, M. D., & Allen, K. D. (2021). Stimulus preference assessment decision-making system (SPADS): A decision-making model for practitioners. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 14, 1144-1156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-020-00539-3>

Wilson, S., Cividini Motta, C., MacNaul, H., Salinas, R., & Ferrer, G. (2024). Preference for social stimuli: A comparison of stimulus modes used in preference assessments. *Behavioral Interventions*, 39(4), e2034. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bin.2034>

For additional information, visit the ACE website:

vcuautismcenter.org

