

Systematic Instruction

Systematic instruction (SI) is an evidence-based, highly structured teaching approach that helps learners acquire skills, from simple to more complex tasks. This instructional method involves intentionally breaking tasks down into smaller parts, providing explicit instructions, and ensuring students achieve mastery at each stage before advancing to the next. SI can be applied across various subjects and functional skills.

SI is effective for autistic students because it directly addresses how the brain processes and stores information. Focusing on one skill at a time, through repeated practice and guided support, promotes student independence and long-term retention of concepts.



● Core Components of Systematic Instruction

PLAN: Before instruction begins, an educational team collaboratively creates a plan tailored to the learner's unique strengths and goals. A well-developed plan establishes a predictable, supportive, and responsive environment.

- **Determine and define the targeted skill.** Identify a target skill, mostly commonly from the student's IEP goals. Develop measurable definitions to help both the student and educational team understand expectations. The definition should include the observable skill, the conditions under which the skill occurs, and the criteria that will be used to evaluate the student's performance.
- **Identify benchmarks.** Complex behaviors or academic tasks can be broken down into smaller achievable skills that build toward the overall goal. For multi-step tasks like daily routines or projects, consider using a [task analysis](#) to break the task into manageable sequential steps.
- **Assess the learner's present level of performance.** This baseline data can be used to show progress over time by comparing the student's initial performance to their current level of achievement.
- **Design instruction.** Identify the specific teaching strategy, required materials, prompting hierarchy (e.g., least-to-most, most-to-least), reinforcement strategies, and data collection methods.
- **Communicate the plan.** Ensure all necessary educational team members know the plan and understand the protocols.

IMPLEMENT: To promote skill development, educational teams implement the instructional plan with consistency, fidelity, and the appropriate level of support.

- **Teach the skill.** Provide direct instruction, presenting content clearly and explicitly to ensure the student understands the skill. Lessons feature step-by-step directions and clear modeling of the target skill. Visual supports, like mini-schedules and checklists, can be paired with other prompts to facilitate student independence.
- **Implement with fidelity.** Consistent, systematic instruction from all team members creates a predictable learning environment that supports skill acquisition.

- **Use the prompting hierarchy.** Identify the least intrusive level of prompting necessary for meaningful, effective skill development. Provide adequate wait time to allow the student to process and respond before giving another prompt. As competence increases, systematically reduce prompts. Consistent fading prevents prompt dependency. To reduce teacher-led prompting and to build self-advocacy, teach students to use visual supports. Remember, visual prompts do not need to be faded.
- **Create opportunities to practice.** Schedule time to practice new skills throughout the school day. Some skills fit naturally into a classroom schedule, such as transitioning between activities and engaging with other students. However, for skills that require more individualized instruction, set aside time for individual or small-group instruction.
- **Reinforce!** [Reinforcement](#) encourages development of skills and increases the likelihood of the student engaging in the task again in the future. When progress is made, provide a learner's preferred reinforcer (e.g., praise, activity, or item) to empower and motivate them to continue practicing the skill.
- **Address learning errors.** Making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process. If and when a student makes a mistake, offer an opportunity to try the skill again and provide an increased level of prompting. The next time the student demonstrates the skill, reinforce their progress.

MONITOR: Effective monitoring transforms student data into meaningful next steps for supporting progress and reaching independence. Use consistent tracking to evaluate student progress, adjust prompting and reinforcement, and purposefully plan for the generalization of skills across new and different settings.

- **Collect and review data regularly.** When a student performs a skill, record the prompt level the student needed to be successful or if it was done independently. After collecting data, analyze the information to determine whether the student is making progress.
- **Adjust instruction.** If progress is being made, consider using a less intrusive prompt or encouraging the student to try the skill independently. If the student isn't making progress, provide a higher level of prompting or adjust the reinforcement to better motivate them.
- **Plan for generalization.** Generalization means the student can do the skill with *anyone, anywhere*. In novel settings, proactively provide the accommodations, instructional strategies, and assistive technology that helped them succeed initially. For students with autism, temporarily increasing prompts often provides the extra support needed to promote generalization of the skill.

Resources:

- [Systematic Instruction Learning Path](#)
- [Creating a Task Analysis](#)
- [Prompting](#)
- [Strategies to Support Autistic Learners: Reinforcement](#)
- [Data-Informed Decision Making for Educators](#)

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