

## SMALL CHANGES COUNT

*By Karen Kaplan*

We appear to live in such a fast pace world, with lists of to do's that get longer and longer. It seems to me that every parent is overwhelmed especially those who have children who learn differently. Perhaps we have become so accustomed to fast, we forget that slow, small changes count just as much. Perhaps we have forgotten that not everyone learns the same and especially acquiring new skills. I think we have gotten lost in this fast pace life we have created and expect everyone to just come along quickly and learn and do it fast.

I say, let us believe, small changes count. Let us celebrate those small steps forward. Let us be proud of individuals moving forward in manageable chunks. I encourage you as a parent to take some pauses. Take some deep breaths, exhaling a sigh or two and realize if you just modify your approach, your individuals with learning difference will make progress. If you nurture growth, your son or daughter will be inspired to learn something new.

- Develop your **patience** with your individual. When you are calm, they feel safe to learn.
- Let go of **perfection**, or thinking they must do it the way you do it. Be okay with trying and every attempt.
- **Break down** the task, action, direction, or question into manageable parts. You might ask them to do the last two steps or the first three steps until they can do them without assistants. Then proceed forward or backward until all steps learned. You may need to show them, model for them, and then guide them physical through the steps before backing off and encouraging them to motor through task-step.
- Sometimes it could help to play, "dumb." I do not know where that is? I forget how to do that? I am not sure where I put it? Do you know where it is? Can you help me? Can you find it? This strategy helps them nurture their small steps towards independence.
- Sometimes you could play **confused**. Which one do you think we should use? Which way do you think we should walk? This strategy helps them to problem solve and take small steps towards independence.
- Instead of giving a command, offer a **choice**. This empowers them.
- You can always offer physical help, but make sure **you ease off** the physical support to teach independence. You might start hand over hand. Then moved to the wrist and finally the shoulder and then perhaps a little tap to get going.
- Many resort to always verbally assisting their individuals to expedite change. If you ever want them to perform the skill without your verbal coaching, then associate a **visual cue** (word, picture, or object) to elicit or begin the task and move through all steps of the task. Put up a showering step visual in the shower. Put up a clean-up your room step-list on a bulletin board in the bedroom. As you model the steps first, point to the picture or word and then fade verbalizing to pointing to the picture or word and finally have them just follow the visual guide.
- There is a great way to expand learning by small steps. I call it **stretching**. Example: Imagine your individual wants some chips, cookies or crackers in bags located in the cupboard. They point to the cupboard or look at the cupboard and you generally just open the cupboard, pull out the bag

or box and give it to them. But you could stretch or expand their communication. When they point or look, you acknowledge, oh, you want something in the cupboard. Please write out, say type, or sign open door. Great telling me to open. Now, what do you want. Please sign or say, crackers, cookies, or chips. Great, now I know what you want. Then you take down the box or bag and pause again. You look confused, not knowing what to do next. You might say, now what. Encourage them to sign or say or write down, open box. Then you follow their direction. Then once again you pause, wait for their next stretch in communication. You might say, how many do you want and wait and then follow their command. You are taking small steps and celebrating their expansion.

- Ask them to set the table. At first just their **own** spot. Later everyone's. Be sure the celebrate them.
- Ask them to carry their laundry basket to the laundry room. Later, sort white, light, and dark colors. Later open and put in washer and then dryer. Celebrate their **small steps** towards completing of the whole task.
- Ask them to squeeze out the tooth paste before they brush. This is a **small step** towards accomplishing the whole task on their own.
- Ask them to put away one or two items bought at the grocery store. This is a **small step** towards sorting and knowing where objects are stored.
- Have them turn on the water to the hose. This is a **first step** in watering flowers. This builds their self-esteem as they learn to take care of the garden.
- Ask them to put lunch items in their container and into the refrigerator. This may be a **first, small** step in packing their own lunch, but it counts. It is a beginning.

There are so many small steps your individual can take **which count**. Remember, that each step learned is a step closer to nurturing independence, acquiring communication comprehension, increasing motor skills, and developing **pride** and positive self-esteem.

If you can just **slow down** for them, you can help them learn. If you just **see all** the little steps in each task and realize they need you to break them into **manageable** steps to learn them, you will see positive results.

If you can just pause in your fast pace life and realize your individual has a different learning style and then meet them where they are and stretch them, you will feel positive about the results.