

Transcript for Becoming a Confident OT

I wanted to talk about what it looks like and what it takes to be a more competent therapist. Because being uncertain in our work just feels bad; it's tiring day to day. But when we show up to work feeling confident and unflappable then we can really feel present with our clients and be more open to what happens whether things go like we expected or not. Then we are able to learn from that and learn from our clients and become even more effective. Because when we come in feeling a little bit uncertain or insecure, that can really get in the way of us learning and growing day to day and session to session. So, I wanted to get really specific with you about some of the components to being an effective therapist when working with kids on the autism spectrum.

One thing that I have found is really important is the ability to let our kids be our teachers. Our job isn't to be able to come in and teach anything to anyone effectively on the first try, or even ever. Our job is to be really skillful observers. To learn about the kids we work with, about what makes sense to them, about how they think, how they learn and what their emerging skills are, what their strengths are and what motivates them. What that means is stepping back and watching and listening and learning from the things that go well and learning from the things that don't go as we expected.

So when I work with an autistic child, I really put my detective hat on. I put a learning activity in front of them and I watch. When they do something to show me "this activity isn't meaningful to me, it's not engaging to me," I say to myself, "That's such good information. You just ripped up that picture schedule. You just laughed under the table when I presented to you that sorting

activity. Thank you for helping me refine my understanding of where you are and how I can meet you there". Rather than saying "Oh my gosh – I don't know what I'm doing. I'm ineffective. I'm just going to resort to doing something safe" or "I'm just going to quit."

When we can put on that detective hat and watch our young autistic clients with interest and with openness, they teach us. Because the truth is, our kids who are on the autism spectrum, they think differently than we do. While we talk about autistic people being bad at perspective taking, neurotypical people are *terrible* at taking the perspective of someone who thinks differently than we do. So we have to be really intentional about watching and observing so that we can learn from our clients.

So, you put on your detective hat, set out a learning activity, and you learn from how a child responds to it. You have to have a really deep toolbox of things that work for autistic learning styles, so that when a child shows you "I don't like your picture schedule, or this learning activity doesn't tap into my set of interests," you can say "Oh, I know something else to try, I know a different way to do this". Then you can try something different and you see how they respond, and when things sort of work, you can keep teaching them for awhile, but you don't need to bang your head against the wall if you've created a learning activity or schedule or to do list or routine that isn't quite working. If you've taught it the best you could, there's been time for a child to learn it, and they're still showing you "this isn't the right thing for me," you go back to the drawing board again and you re-work it.

In order to be able to have that quality of openness and interest and thinking like a detective, you do need to have a lot of skills at your disposal. But even if you're just starting and you feel

like your toolbox only has a few things in it, it's still worth it to take the time to listen and learn from what your kids are teaching you. Because that will show you what gaps in your own knowledge and skills you need to learn.

Here's another thing you can do. When you're working with caregivers, is sometimes it can be really tempting to want to avoid anything really challenging altogether. When we see our kids struggle, we feel like we have failed. And for folks who are newer or uncertain of their skills, that can feel embarrassing in front of a parent or caregiver or teacher. But the truth is, if this is a child that is really struggling in their daily routine, and you really want to learn about that and figure out how you can help them participate more successfully in their regular, daily life, what I say when things go badly is "Wow, I'm so glad I got to see that. Is that what you're seeing all the time in the classroom / at home / every time you have to get in the car?"

Whatever the situation is, the parent, the teacher, the caregiver is probably facing this all the time and they're not there for you to impress them with your ability to never run into challenges; you're there to learn about what's happening in the child's daily life, validate it, "Wow, that's really tough". Then figure out what makes sense to the child, what motivates the child, how you can help them specifically in that daily routine, with more success, more interest, more engagement and less frustration.

So that's two things: 1) putting on your detective hat, being a good observer and 2) using the phrase "I'm so glad I got to see that", when things don't go well.

We do need to be able to break through that perspective taking barrier that we have where we look through a neurotypical lense. But if you don't have a deep understanding of autism learning styles, you're not going to learn that just by watching your clients, because some of the things that you will see won't make sense without your autism lense. So, I encourage you to do what it takes to go really deep on autism learning styles and then also to really, truly build up your toolbox of practical, effective interventions that will be meaningful to your kids who are on the autism spectrum.

You'll know you have the right toolbox when you can teach new skills without using hand-over-hand to get a child's engagement in something, because that really violates their right to autonomy and to make choices and to control their body. You need to have the skills to get your child's interest and engagement in a learning activity without moving their body for them. I would also say that you need to be able to get them engaged and interested and participating in ways that are going to enrich their own lives and help them meet their goals or their family's goals without relying on external motivators and reinforcers. Because that's something we need to use when we aren't able to connect with a child and connect what we're doing to something that will be meaningful to them and make sense to them.

So that should be your goal: to be able to approach a situation like a detective, to be open to learning from the child about what's meaningful to them and to learn to teach in a way that doesn't demand that you move the child's body for them or use external, unrelated motivators or reinforcers to try and get their participation.

That's my challenge to you. You are getting my emails. You know I'm here to help you if you feel like you need some more skills to rise to that challenge . If it's the autism learning styles piece you need, just check out my free masterclass where I talk about it for 40 minutes. It's very up to date with a lot of the latest information about how kids on the autism spectrum think and learn. If it's interventions you need, you can hop into my online training or my upcoming live training in Asheville, North Carolina and I will fill up your toolbox. Let me know in the comments, or if you're getting this by email, hit reply and let me know if this speaks to you.