It’s a good idea to monitor the instructional progress of each student on a frequent basis. Those evaluations are vital for making timely and appropriate instructional decisions. Presumably, however, we don’t just want good instructional performance, we want our students to use their skills outside the instructional situation during the course of heir daily lives. To find out whether that goal is achieved, special “application probes” will have to be conducted.

**General Probe Characteristics**

Students should be prepared for the “real world,” and skill-use probes should reflect that world as closely as possible. That has several implications for the way in which our probes should be conducted.

**Conduct Application Probes in a Representative Sampling of “Natural” Settings**

Probes should be conducted in at least a sampling of the situations in which the skill might and/or should prove useful. Occasionally a skill will be useful even if it is practiced in only one situation. If so, then that situation should be given the highest priority for evaluation, but every effort should usually be made to evaluate the skill in as many different situations as possible.

Example 1: Dressing is most important in the home, so a home probe should be given the highest priority. Dressing skills might also be useful outside the home, however, like before and after PE or swimming, or when spending the night with friends. Probes should also be conducted in those situations if at all possible.

Example 2: Saying names of food items may be most useful in the school cafeteria or at home, but a really complete set of probes would also include restaurants and supermarkets to see, for example, if the student is able to ask where an item is located.

Example 3: Dressing might be probed in “private” areas like the student’s own bedroom and “public” areas like the locker room at the school or local swimming pool.

Example 4: Shopping should be probed in both large and small stores that use different food placement practices, methods for labeling prices, displaying goods, and checking out.

Of course, when trying to identify a variety of different situations for our probes, it’s still important to keep the real world in mind. Don’t set up a meaningless situation simply to be different.

Example 5: Dressing behind a screen in the back of the classroom is not a good example of the situations in which the skill will typically be used.

Example 6: Identifying important signs (e.g., “men,” “women,” “exit”) would be appropriate in the school halls or the community, but the student would not typically use those skills in a small communication-therapy room down the hall from the classroom.

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1 This manuscript was first published in a book edited by Norris Haring concerning methods for facilitating the generalized application of skills by persons with severe disabilities (White, O. (1988). Chapter 7: Probing Skill Use. In N. G. Haring, K. A. Liberty, O. White, and F. F. Billingsley (Eds.). Generalization: Strategies and Solutions for Students with Severe Handicaps. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press). It has been updated slightly to bring it more to terms with contemporary thought.
Finally, probes should be conducted in situations that are noticeably different from the situation in which instruction took place. If instruction takes place in one or more of the situations in which the skill will be used, something about the way the probe is conducted should still be changed (e.g., the people involved, or perhaps the levels of assistance and cues used). Those other variables will be discussed later in this chapter.

Probes Should be Conducted at Natural Times and Exploit Natural Opportunities

The general “setting events” or circumstances leading up to the probe should be as similar as possible to those which should eventually control the behavior.

Example 7: Dressing in the classroom at precisely 11:00 each day is not natural, even if it is convenient for the teacher. Dressing in the morning at home or after PE at school is natural.

Example 8: Ordering fast food at lunchtime is natural, but going to a fast food restaurant and ordering food just after eating lunch at school is not natural.

Keep the Number and Distribution of Opportunities Natural

Some behaviors occur only once or a few times each day, while other behaviors will occur many times. Also, some behaviors will occur several times during a short period, while the occasions for another skill might be distributed throughout the day. The number and distribution of opportunities to use a skill during an application probe should be as natural as possible.

Example 9: When a person has finished one dressing sequence, that’s generally the end of it for a while. It is not natural to have a student get dressed, undressed, and dressed again several times in a row. To get at least two dressing sequences completed in a relatively short period, special activities might be scheduled (e.g., a trip to the swimming pool, a clothes shopping trip, or a dress rehearsal for a class play).

Example 10: When we take a bite during lunch, we generally take several bites in relatively rapid succession before the meal is finished. It would be natural, therefore, to assess a student’s eating skills by evaluating several bites all in one short period. It would not be natural to let the student have only one chance to take a bite independently, then remove the meal or immediately begin to feed the student yourself.

Example 11: Using a communication board to answer questions could occur almost anywhere and at any time. However, it would not be natural to ask a student 105 questions during a 10-minute period, then never ask another question all day.

Efforts to “train in the natural environment” should be encouraged, but some forethought is likely to help. The “natural environment” is not always friendly, and just being in a natural environment doesn’t necessarily mean that all of the natural contingencies will exist or even be allowed to control the behavior of our student. For example, busy streets are not usually the best place to begin street-crossing training, even if the student must eventually cross busy streets. Also, if our training simply involves going back-and-forth across the same street, we’d be denying the student access to the natural consequences of street crossing (getting somewhere). Some advance planning, and perhaps even a little “pre-training” for common skills and discriminations, is likely to make training in natural environments much more rewarding.
**Involve People Who Would Naturally Be Involved**

If the behavior involves interaction with a person, or people are at least likely to be present when the skill is employed, every attempt should be made to involve those people who would be most naturally involved.

**Example 12:** Most dressing tasks will be performed in the privacy of one's own home. If other people are involved to assist or are “just around,” like a sibling who shares the same room, they are likely to be members of the family. It would *not* be natural for an unknown person or even the student's teacher to invade the student's bedroom to conduct a dressing probe. It might be natural for strangers to be around while a student gets dressed in a public locker room, but a stranger should not provide any direct assistance. If assistance is required in a task like dressing, someone the student knows should offer it.

**Example 13:** Under certain circumstances, virtually anyone might ask a student a question. For application probes of skills gained in a communication program, therefore, a real mix of familiar and unfamiliar people would be appropriate. Of course, the nature of the question should be appropriate — some questions would be inappropriate for strangers to ask.

**Example 14:** Almost anyone might be around when a student is eating in a public place, or even in the home as a family visitor. However, it would generally *not* be appropriate for an unknown person to provide assistance to the student during the meal.

**Use Natural Cues and Assistance**

The cues or signals within the environment which tell the pupil when it is appropriate or inappropriate to behave in a certain way should be as natural as possible. That does not mean that cues cannot be enhanced a bit, if it is appropriate for the student's level of expertise, but such enhancements should be reasonable and represent the type of thing a person might do naturally to help someone out.

**Example 15:** Ideally, a student would automatically get dressed after getting out of bed in the morning or following a shower. The application probe should be constructed to allow the student the opportunity to demonstrate the skill given only those natural conditions. If the student does not begin to get dressed in a reasonable period, however, it would also be natural for a parent or coach to nag a bit, “Come on, it's time to get dressed.” When the student has not yet completely mastered all the steps in a dressing sequence, it might even be natural for parents or other familiar people to provide a little assistance like reminders about what to put on next, help in pulling up socks, or assistance in buttoning. Dramatic or elaborate forms of assistance like graduated guidance, molding, continuous tapping, or exaggerated gesturing would *not* be natural in the typical dressing situation, and should be avoided.

**Example 16:** A host of natural cues should control requesting food at a fast food restaurant, including moving to the front of the line and hearing the person behind the counter say something like, “May I help you?” It might also be natural for a waitress to ask something very specific like, “Would you like a hamburger?” or for a friend or parent to provide alternatives like, “Would you like a hamburger or chicken chunks?” It would *not* be natural for a person to hold up a picture card for the student to read, or to shout at the student, “HAMBURGER, say HAMBURGER!!!”

**Example 17:** Pointing to a picture on a communication board in response to a question should, ideally, be prompted solely by the question itself. Many people would understand the purpose of a communication board, however, and might well add extra prompts like, “Point to a
picture,” or “Can you tell me by using your picture board?” It would be especially appropriate for a parent or friend to add such cues. It would not be natural for a relative stranger to chant, “Show me the answer, point….,” while making the student touch each picture in turn.

Example 18: Walking should usually be prompted by the desire to get somewhere. Given a choice of walking, crawling, or being carried, if all three modes of locomotion are possible, the best probe for walking would be to simply see which way the student chooses to travel. To ensure proper motivation, special incentives might be provided (e.g., “Come to the kitchen and I'll fix you a snack”). If the student consistently chooses some other form of locomotion, like crawling, walking could not be considered a truly useful a skill. Some support might be given, like holding the student's hand, or offering the student your arm. That would reduce the usefulness of walking, but being able to walk under those circumstances would still be better than not being able to walk at all. However, it would not be natural for the parent to crawl behind the child, tapping the back of each knee in turn to prompt each step; and it would not be useful for a helper to offer so much support that the student is virtually being carried.

Use Natural Consequences and Feedback

If a skill is to be truly useful, it must be maintained by natural consequences. As with cues and assistance, however, some exceptions might be made for a person who has not fully mastered a skill.

Example 19: The consequences for dressing are usually warmth and the avoidance of nasty (or lecherous) stares from other people. Children are sometimes also threatened with cost contingencies (e.g., “You won't get any breakfast until...”), and they might also be praised if they get dressed nicely. It is not natural, however, to consequate each correctly performed step in a dressing sequence with a bit of Fruit-Loops, or follow errors with “a physical mandate,” undoing the step, and telling the student to try again.” A hurried parent is much more likely to consequate errors by scowling and doing it him/herself.

Example 20: The consequence for street crossing is usually getting closer to some destination. Special incentives could be provided for getting somewhere (e.g., “Let's go to the park and get an ice cream cone”), and it might also be appropriate to provide a little praise for crossing quickly and safely, or a sharp reprimand for crossing when it was not safe. It would not be natural, however, to have a child cross a street just so he can turn around and cross back.

Example 21: The natural consequence for scooping food is getting it ready to eat, even if we need some help getting the spoon to our mouth. It helps if the food is something the student likes. Praise for good eating is not too unnatural, as long as it comes from a familiar person, and rebukes for slopping or slow scooping might also be in order. Occasionally it would even be natural to have one's food taken away for making too much of a mess, but it is unlikely that a parent or friend would naturally consequate errors with 50 trials of over-correction or precisely 15.6 seconds of time out.

If a “Natural Probe” Doesn't Seem Reasonable...

Skill-use or application probes should attempt to emulate the conditions that are most likely to occur in the “real world.” If a natural probe doesn't seem reasonable, perhaps the usefulness of the skill should be questioned. Perhaps other skills in some hierarchy must be developed before skill-use probes make sense, or maybe the skill will never be useful and should just be dropped from the student's curriculum. In any event, if a natural probe doesn't make sense, reconsider your instructional targets.
When Should a Skill be Probed?

Most people only probe the application of a skill after the student has mastered it in an instructional setting. However, probing before instruction begins and frequently during the instructional sequence can be very useful.

Probe Before Instruction Starts

Students, even students with severe disabilities, are often much more capable than we think. Surprises abound.

Example 22: One teacher worked long and hard to get a student with severe disabilities to speak in two-word phrases, only to find out that the child had already been speaking in six- and seven-word phrases in the home for several years! Luckily, the student did not generalize his “school-skill” to the home, but continued to use the longer phrases there.

Example 23: Special therapists in a residential facility “taught” an adult with severe disabilities to eat with a spoon, only to discover that he had already been using that skill in other environments since he was very young. He had been transferred into a cottage where most of the other residents ate with their fingers, and he just decided to “do as the Romans do.” Had they asked the resident to eat with a spoon before starting to shape it, they might have saved themselves and their student a lot of time and effort.

Example 24: One parent decided to teach the alphabet to her young daughter who had a mild disability. Her special preschool instructors hadn't gotten to that skill in class, and it seemed a good idea to give her daughter a head start. When the mother began, however, her daughter rambled off the whole alphabet without a single error and named the letters when shown to her on cards. Why she wouldn't do it at school yet was a mystery.

Example 25: One teacher worked out a careful sequence of steps that would allow a youngster with multiple disabilities to transfer independently from his walker to the toilet. When prompted through the sequence during an initial assessment the student started to make many errors (i.e., he did something other than what he was being asked to do). During the next few weeks he seemed to progress nicely in the program, but still forgot some of the steps, and had to be brought back to the right step in the sequence over and over again. Finally the teacher decided to just sit back and see what happened. The student made the transfer quickly and easily without help — he just left out those steps in the sequence that seemed to be giving him trouble, and substituted a few other steps which worked just fine. The student had a better “task analysis” in mind.

The lesson should be clear. Just because a student hasn't been “taught” a skill, and just because the student doesn't “share” the skill when formally assessed, doesn't mean that the student can't apply the skill or a useful alternative in the real world. In addition to traditional pre-instruction assessments, it helps to ask other people (e.g., parents, friends, former teachers) what the student does, and to observe the student in natural situations to see what happens. Otherwise, we might expend a great deal of time and energy to develop and implement a program that might not be needed at all.

Probe as Often as Possible While the Skill is Being Developed

Assuming that the skill really does need to be taught, there still remains the question of how well the student must learn to perform the skill before it becomes useful. Suggestions for performance aims can be found in many books and curriculum guides, along with strategies for establishing individualized standards, but we never really know how good is good enough until the usefulness of the skill is probed in a natural situation.
Example 26: The student with multiple disabilities in Example 25 who wrote his own “task analysis” for transferring from the walker to the toilet might not have known how to perform that task before instruction began. Since his teacher did not try a “hands off” skill-application probe before starting the program, we'll never know. Because his teacher *did* probe for independent skill use before the student reached the instructional aim, however, at least the program was terminated before too much time was wasted.

Example 27: A therapist working on dressing skills with a young child with disabilities established a “buttoning” aim which seemed reasonable given the child's physical limitations. Since she did not really know how fast one should button before the skill is truly useful, however, she also asked the child's parents to help. She asked them to pause each morning in the dressing sequence when it was time to button their daughter's blouse. They didn't have to say anything, just wait a moment or two. When the child was only halfway to her instructional aim she began to button her own buttons at home without any prompts or assistance. The parents said she was quick enough to make it worth their while to let her do it, and it was obviously worthwhile to their daughter. The school program was terminated, with likely savings of several weeks of time and effort.

**Probe After instruction Ends**

Skill-application probes before and during instruction can be very helpful and often result in better programs and/or savings in time. Even if “before and during” probes are not conducted, however, it is absolutely essential to probe for skill use when a pupil has reached the instructional aim, but before the program is terminated. Quite simply, unless the child actually begins to use the skills we teach, there is a very good chance that the skill never will be used.

Example 28: A teacher in a class for elementary school children with mild disabilities worked a little each day to help one student overcome a minor speech impairment. She wanted to bring the student's fluency in saying the sounds correctly up to a level that was equivalent to the fluency of her nonhandicapped peers. After reaching the aim the program was terminated, but the teacher noticed that the girl slipped back into her old habits whenever she was engaged in conversation with one of her friends. The program was reinstated and kept in place until the child was able to say the sounds at normal fluency with no errors for *nine days in a row*. More probes revealed that the child *still* slipped back into her old habits. The program was begun once again. This time the teacher *doubled* the fluency aim (“Now, Patsy, you have a problem, so you must be twice as good as most children...”). After reaching the new aim, Patsy began to use the correct speech patterns in all her conversations without being reminded. The extra week it took to reach the new aim was certainly well worth the effort.

Example 29: When students with severe disabilities were evaluated in the fall at a secondary school, many could no longer perform several of the skills they had “mastered” the preceding spring. Before re-teaching the skills, however, the parents were interviewed and it was discovered that in almost every case, the students remembered the skills they had been given opportunities to use over the summer, and forgot the skills they did *not* have the opportunity to practice. The students who had been given the opportunity to ride a bus, for example, remembered how to ride buses; the students who had no opportunity to ride buses over the summer had forgotten. After discussing the problem with the parents, some of the programs were dropped as being essentially meaningless for some students, and other programs were reinstated with assurances from the parents that opportunities to practice the skill would be provided. In both cases, time was saved and the individual curricula became more meaningful.
It makes sense to probe immediately after the instructional aim has been reached and again much later. Unless assurances are provided that the skills we teach are actually being used and continue to be used, a great deal of instructional time can be wasted.

**Probe Whenever It is Practical**

Ideally, skill-use probes would be conducted every day, or at least as often as instruction is provided. In some cases that is not difficult to arrange, like the buttoning program where the parents were simply asked to pause each day and give their daughter a chance to do it herself. It would also have been relatively easy for the teacher working with the speech impaired child to simply note how the child conversed with her peers for a few minutes during each lunch or recess.

In other cases it might be difficult or impossible to conduct skill-use probes very often. Some skills may be expensive, like shopping or ordering food in restaurants. In addition to the cost in dollars, we should also consider the time and good will of people involved in the probes. Parents might not object to occasional trips to the library to give their child the opportunity to practice his skills, but they are not likely to feel very good about a request that they do that every day.

Finally, if the same people conduct essentially the same probe too often, the student might learn to perform well in that situation, but still not be able to perform the skill with other people or in slightly different situations. It's a good idea to rotate people and situations as often as possible, both to reduce the effort required of any given person, and to provide more information about a wider range of skill-use situations.

**How Should a Probe be Conducted?**

Three basic strategies are available for probing skill use: (1) asking people who know; (2) asking people to find out; and (3) directly observing the behavior.

**Just Asking for Retrospective Reports**

The easiest and least expensive way to evaluate skill use is simply to ask one or more people who are in a natural position to know. To learn if a child is toilet trained, for example, one might only have to ask the parents how many times they had to clean up after accidents over the last few days. Accidents are hard to miss, so parents could generally be relied upon to know the truth of the matter. Of course, if the parents have the child “on a schedule”, going to the bathroom at regular intervals and helping the child undress and eliminate, the parents might not know if the child was independently reliable. It might be a good idea to ask them to give their child less guidance to see what happens.

Simply asking someone about a skill is a good strategy when...

1. **One or more people can be identified who are in a good position to be aware of how the child uses a skill.**

   Parents are an obvious choice in most cases, but depending upon the skill, school personnel, friends, or even strangers might be appropriate. After a student has made a purchase and left a store, for example, the clerk might be asked whether there had been any difficulty in the transaction and whether the student had used certain “key behaviors” he had been taught.

2. **Natural opportunities exist for the behavior in sufficient number to allow the observer to make an accurate assessment.**

   Behaviors, which are truly self-initiated, that is, behaviors that the child can undertake without any assistance, are probably the best candidates for evaluations by simple reports. Assuming that all necessary materials are available, expressive communication would be a good candidate, but responsive communication like “answering questions” might pose a difficulty if no one ever thinks to ask a question. Reliable reports could also be obtained for behaviors like toileting and walking, but parents might...
Probing Skill Use — 8

inadvertently restrict the opportunities for those behaviors. Before relying on any report, therefore, be sure to ask whether the opportunity to use the skill really exists.

(3) The consequences of the behavior or failing to behave are dramatic or otherwise hard to miss.

If the behavior or the consequences of failing to behave appropriately are hard to overlook, people are much more likely to make accurate reports. If a child had always scooted on the floor to get around and suddenly started to walk, that would be hard to overlook. On the other hand, if the behavior is rather subtle, people might simply not notice whether it occurs. For example, most parents don't know if their young children use a palmar grasp or a pincer grasp, even if they know the difference between the two grasps. That sort of behavior is simply too easy to overlook unless we are specifically asked to assess it.

To get reports from informed people...

It is best to solicit reports in person or by telephone. It will then be possible to follow up immediately on unexpected statements and to engage in a conversation to elicit the specific information desired.

(1) Prepare a list of questions ahead of time.

Prepare a list of key questions before beginning your interview. There is nothing wrong with ad-libbing somewhat, but you must have a clear idea of the critical issues to be addressed. The items outlined below should provide some ideas for that list.

(2) Describe the skill of interest and ask if they have seen the student use it.

Generally, it's best to keep things simple. Instead of asking whether a child performs each step in a self-feeding program correctly, for example, it's best simply to ask the parent if the child eats without assistance. If the answer is “yes,” then you might want to know a bit more about the specifics — does he serve himself, does he scoop, does he spill food, and so on. If the answer is “no,” then you might have to focus on more specific sub-steps in the task. Still try to keep questions rather general, so you have the chance to discover whether the student uses behaviors different from those which you are teaching. If you ask whether the child scoops his food from the right-to-left side of the plate, for example, you might never discover that he does perfectly well at home, but scoops from the front-to-back.

It may also be useful to ask about a broader behavior than you have been teaching or plan to teach. Even though you might only he working with “scooping” in an eating program, for example, you might begin by asking about “independent eating” in general. Broad questions can sometimes reveal many surprises, and if they don't, you can always ask more specific questions about the actual sub-skill of interest.

Finally, there are times when you will need to be very specific. After asking whether the child picks up small objects, you might need to describe the difference between a palmar grasp and a pincer grasp in order to get an accurate report from the parents concerning that important variation in the skill. Leave those detailed questions until the end of your interviews, however.

(3) Establish whether there are sufficient opportunities for the behavior to occur.

If the person reports that the skill is not used, be sure to ask whether there are any opportunities for the skill to occur. For example, if parents report that their child does not eat without assistance, ask them if they ever give their child the chance to eat independently, or simply feed him or her. Even if the parent reports that the skill is used, be sure to find out how often they’ve seen it. Occasionally a person will report that a skill is being used, but can only remember seeing it once, several months ago. Reports of skill-use more than a few days old might not be reliable.

(4) Identify the conditions under which the skill is used.

If the skill is used, try to determine the conditions under which it occurs. Does the student use the skill “spontaneously,” or only after a little “nagging?” Are special cues or prompts necessary? Is any special assistance provided? What happens after the skill has been performed — is the child consequated in any...
special fashion, or does he simply achieve whatever the natural outcome of the skill would be? Often the answers to such questions can be useful in identifying ways of making the instructional program more effective, and until the skill is used under conditions which can be called at least an approximation of “natural conditions,” the program cannot be considered a complete success.

5. Ask for a summary statement of “satisfaction.”

Before closing the conversation, ask for an overall evaluation of the skill. It sometimes helps to provide a little structure to the question, like asking whether the behavior is “just fine,” or “O.K., but it could still improve,” or “pretty bad and not worth the effort.” A parent might report that the child can eat independently, but that the time necessary to clean up the mess after letting him try makes it unlikely that many opportunities will be provided. That would be very important information for determining whether a program can be considered a success.

Getting Someone to Look — Direct Observations

If a person who could be expected to have seen the skill already cannot be identified, it may be necessary to ask someone to look for it.

Asking someone to look for the application of a skill is a good strategy when...

1. The behavior is 'private' or easily overlooked.

Some behaviors may go relatively unnoticed, like recreational or leisure skills that are generally performed alone, or whether the child consistently says “thank you” after being helped in the community. In such cases, it might be necessary to ask someone to make a specific effort to observe the skill.

2. Key features of the behavior are subtle.

It is often unreasonable to expect even concerned persons to make subtle distinctions about certain key features of a skill. Parents might not notice certain speech patterns, for example, or exactly how their child manipulates objects. In addition to asking a person to be more vigilant, it might be necessary to provide a little training in how the skill can be identified and evaluated.

3. Good opportunities for the skill to be used do not occur often enough for a meaningful evaluation.

Opportunities might have to be created for the proper evaluation of a skill. If parents usually feed their child, you could ask them to provide at least some opportunity for the child to eat independently. Special equipment, like a communication board or walker, might have to be sent to the new situation before the skill can be assessed. It might also be necessary to provide guidance concerning the way in which opportunities should be provided. If placing a wheelchair-bound child in a walker doesn't seem to produce results, for example, the parents might be told to provide a gentle push on the back to get things going.

To solicit direct observations by other people...

1. Prepare a small packet of necessary materials.

Unlike retrospective reports, it is generally a good idea to provide people with a prepared set of materials when asking them to make a special effort to observe a skill. Those materials might include a brief description of the skill to be observed, examples or illustrations (e.g., a drawing of the way in which the child should be sitting), suggestions as to how the observation might be conducted (e.g., the time of day; general activity; allowable cues, assistance, or consequences), and perhaps a special form for recording the results of the observation. Of course, any necessary equipment (e.g., communication boards or arm splints) should also be provided if it is not already available in the situation where the observation will take place.

Any suggestions concerning when and how the observation should be conducted should stress the idea that conditions should be kept as natural as possible. The observer should be directed to terminate the observation if it appears necessary to provide so much assistance or guidance that the skill would no longer
serve any reasonable purpose. If possible, the observer should be asked to try and observe the skill on several occasions before making a final evaluation.

Special materials should be brief and simple — no more than a page or two. The procedures you ask an observer to employ should move from the general to the specific. That is, observers should first try to elicit the most general skill in the least intrusive manner possible (e.g., simply placing a student near the walker and seeing what happens). If that fails to elicit the skill, the observer can become more and more specific in setting up or guiding the activity.

(2) **Provide special training, if necessary.**

When the target skill has one or more “key features” that might be difficult to evaluate, it might be necessary to provide the observer with a little training. Frequently that can take the form of having the person come into the school and observe several children who do and do not display the skill in question. Alternatively, the teacher might visit the observation site and demonstrate to the observer how to set up and conduct probes.

As with materials, training should be as brief and simple as possible. Whenever possible, training should involve some active participation on the part of the new observer. Don't just demonstrate the skill to the observer, ask the new observer to demonstrate it as well. Don't just show how the probe should be conducted, ask the new observer to practice it while you are still there to provide feedback.

(3) **Follow-up the activity with an interview**

After the observer has had the opportunity to probe the skill, meet or call the observer to find out what happened. That interview would generally take the same form described earlier for retrospective reports.

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Looking — Conducting Direct Observations Yourself

If other willing people cannot be found, or the evaluation skills necessary to assess the behavior are too complicated for other people to employ, you’ll have to conduct the observation yourself. That can be a problem. You might have become too much a part of the conditions that signal the student to use the skill. If so, you might represent an “unfair advantage” when it comes to seeing if the child can decide when and where to use the skill. To avoid that problem, you should:

(1) **Avoid using special conditions or cues associated strongly with instruction.**

Being familiar with the instructional program will make it difficult for you to be “natural.” Out of habit, there will be a tendency for you to use special cues, prompts, levels of assistance, and consequences that are also used during instruction. Even if those events are reasonable approximations of “natural events,” you must strive not to use them extensively, and to intermix them with other events that are not used during instruction, but which are likely to occur outside instruction.

(2) **Be as unobtrusive as possible.**

In some cases you will not have to work directly with the individual in order to conduct the observation. To evaluate shopping skills, for example, you need only be “around” when the shopping expedition takes place. That reduces the threat of using “unnatural events,” but it doesn't necessarily mean that you won't influence the outcomes. Just being there, as you are during instruction, can serve as a special “signal” to the student to behave in a particular way. The student might perform the shopping skills well enough as long as he knows you’re looking, but fall to pieces the minute you're out of sight. Unless you always plan to be there when he’s shopping, that’s a problem.

To minimize the effects of your presence, try to be as unobtrusive as possible. If you can, conduct the observation covertly, so the student has no idea that you are there at all. If a covert observation is impossible, then at least be as “natural” as possible. Stroll casually around the store, keeping the student in sight; don’t hover within inches of his back with a stopwatch and clipboard in hand, madly recording his every move.
A Summary Checklist

Probes for skill use can provide very important information for deciding what to teach, how to teach, and when instruction can be safely terminated. Probes can often be quite easy and simple to conduct, but they must be carefully planned to provide the most meaningful information possible.

Be Natural

It is most important to construct probes that reflect the natural conditions under which the skill will be used. That includes:

- Natural settings
- Natural times and opportunities
- Natural number and distribution of opportunities
- People who would naturally be involved
- Natural cues and assistance
- Natural consequences

If it seems difficult to think of the natural conditions under which a skill would be used, perhaps the skill isn't really important and shouldn't be taught.

Probe Often

Whenever possible, skill-application probes should be conducted:

- Before an instructional program is developed
- During the instructional process
- After the instructional aim has been reached, but before the program is terminated
- Long after the program is terminated to see if skill-use has maintained

If it's not possible to check for skill use after the student has reached the instructional aim, you're taking a great risk that all the instruction will have gone to waste.

Probe Efficiently

- Just ask someone who should know if the skill is being used. If that's not possible,
- Ask someone to make a special effort to see if the skill is being used, or as a last resort,
- Conduct direct observations of the skill yourself.

In any event, conduct the probe as efficiently and unobtrusively as possible.