"You're so smart. Why don't you just do it?"

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Bridges Associates, Inc., a private not-for-profit organization, helps children and adults who learn differently to take charge of their lives through consultation, evaluation, training and program development.

Does the title sound familiar? How many times as parents or teachers have we thought this about a child, and maybe even said this to a child? Probably more times than we care to admit! Think of the child who can state that he should hand in his homework but chronically fails to do so, or the child who goes to her room with every intention of getting dressed for school, only to still be in her pajamas 20 minutes later! This article will attempt to explain why "just doing it" is more complicated than it may seem and how we can help children learn to "do it."

There are clearly many reasons why children may fail to do things that seem so simple. Sometimes they are preoccupied with their own lives, sometimes they are showing off their independence, and sometimes this is a subtle way of showing that they are angry about something. However, there is a whole group of students who intend to behave responsibly but have inordinate difficulty doing so. Sometimes these children are labeled as attention deficit disordered, executive function disordered, or learning disabled. Regardless of the label, these are children who have a neurologically based difficulty getting things done! Just as we recognize that some people's brains are poorly wired for reading, these children's brains are poorly wired for "doing."

Teachers are familiar with the concept of *reading fluency*. Briefly, reading fluency is the ability to rapidly and accurately read and understand text. When one is fluent in reading, reading becomes effortless, enjoyable, and efficient (Shaywitz, 2003).

In working with students I have begun to apply the concept of *fluency* to behavior. *Behavioral fluency*, as I have thought about it, is the ability to effortlessly and appropriately execute desired behaviors at the appropriate time, in other words "to just do it." For example, think of the child who always checks his back pack to be sure he has all necessary items before leaving for school, or the child who always applies writing strategies taught in class to her term report. In each case they are demonstrating behavioral fluency! On the other hand, think of the two children described in the first paragraph. Both lack behavioral fluency.

Behavioral fluency can be broken down into two parts, knowing what to do and doing what you know. *Knowing what to do* is being able to state what is expected, a kind of rhetorical knowledge, such as stating one should hand in one's homework or check one's back pack. *Doing what you know* is actually implementing that behavior at the appropriate time, a kind of action skill, such as actually handing in one's homework or checking one's backpack. When one is fluent in behavior, behavior becomes effortless, enjoyable and efficient.

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Knowing What to Do: Pattern Recognition

Knowing what to do is rooted in something called pattern recognition (Goldberg, 2005). Pattern recognition is the ability to recognize something as familiar - something one has seen or done or encountered before. Pattern recognition provides a ready made, pre-packaged response to situations. Without this ability, every encounter would be novel and every response would be unpredictable. For example, with good pattern recognition, if one encounters three very different looking objects such as a recliner, a ladder back chair, and a rocking chair, one recognizes that they all fit one pattern and one knows, without having to think, that each is a chair and that one should sit on each of them and not attempt to put a TV on them.

What might happen if one had poor pattern recognition? In other words, what if one did not easily recognize how a new experience was similar or dissimilar to a previous experience and use that knowledge to guide behavior. Sometimes such an individual might be called "disinhibited," responding without fully considering how the new situation relates to prior experience. Using the example of the chairs, anything with four legs would prompt sitting behavior, including tables, desks, and the cat and the dog! Using the example of failing to get dressed before school, one might go to one's room, see a puzzle on the floor, and begin to play with it instead of getting dressed.

Other individuals with poor pattern recognition might be called "resistant," not making any connection between prior experience and a new situation. Again using the example of the chairs, a rocking chair might prompt sitting behavior but a recliner or a ladder back would not. Using the example of handing in homework, one might hand in homework one day but fail to do it the next.

Use language to help your child develop pattern recognition

How does one help individuals develop pattern recognition? You might begin by making them aware of patterns in their lives, prompted by asking good questions. Thoughtful inquiry serves many purposes. It provides an opportunity for processing and comprehension of the behavior that some might call resistant or disinhibited. It also provides opportunity for thinking about other solutions and making decisions when faced with a similar situation in the future. For example, in the case of the child who chronically fails to hand in his homework, the teacher might begin class with the question, "What is the first thing we do in class each day?" or the parent might say, "Remember the day you handed in your homework. How did you remember to do that?" In the case of the child who was still in her pajamas when supposedly getting dressed for school, the parent might say, "Can you predict what will happen when you go to your room to get dressed?" In each case one is helping the child begin to organize past experience into a pattern to guide future behavior.

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Ask your child these questions

What does routine mean to you?
Do you have regular routines in your life?
Are some people or activities "predictable"?
Do you do some things at the same time or in the same place each day?
Does practice make things easier to do?
Can you predict when you will…eat lunch…check email, etc.?
Have you ever noticed that some times you can do two things at once?
How do you know what to do in a new situation?
Think of a new situation where you felt calm and confident. Why?
Think of a new situation where you felt nervous. Why?

There is no right or wrong answer. You are simply coaxing your child to think about patterns and routines in their lives. Talk to him about his answers. Share how you might answer these questions.

Pay attention to the individual's response as it may give clues as to how to help them. For example, I have asked many students what patterns they have to help keep track of what they must have in their back pack each morning before leaving for school. Consider the variety of responses! A very organized girl told me: *I lay it all out the night before just before I go to bed.* (time pattern) A young boy told me: *I look through my back pack while eating breakfast at the table.* (place pattern) A rather creative high school girl told me: *I feel how heavy my back pack is.* (kinesthetic pattern) And one embarrassed boy told me: *My mother does it for me.* (dependency pattern)

Use non verbal techniques to help your child develop pattern recognition

For some people, however, language based instruction is not meaningful. Alternatively, they may learn better non verbally. For example, color coding desired patterns (i.e., getting dressed in the morning as red, handing in homework as green, etc.) and then coloring in a daily/ weekly planner according to how one will fit these behaviors into one's day/week (Beach and Beach, 2006), can provide the learner a multisensory experience of patterned behavior. The kinesthetics involved in coloring and the resultant rainbow of color on the planner are two highly compelling, non verbal ways of experiencing patterns. Pattern recognition is enhanced by performing this task prospectively (Levine-2004 calls this previewing) where one creates an ideal schedule where the desired patterns are represented. Pattern recognition is also established retrospectively (Levine-2004 calls this review) by coloring in one's actual schedule at the end of the week and comparing it to one's ideal schedule. Comparing weekly actual schedules over time can help highlight emerging patterns of behavior.

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When is enough enough?

Pattern recognition is also the product of something educators might refer to as *overlearning*. Like the development of reading fluency, the more one practices an activity, the more likely it will become automatic. This means that the types of verbal and non verbal techniques described in the previous paragraphs may need to be repeated many times, just like reading fluency activities may need to be part of daily reading instruction.

A question often asked at this point is, *How much time on task is enough time? How much do I have to practice? When will I be fluent?* This evokes the image of the individual with substance abuse beginning a recovery program and asking, For *how long do I have to go to meetings?* with the answer being, *Until you start to like it!* You must practice until the behavior becomes automatic, until the effort becomes effortless. While this response may seem a bit glib, it is intended to place the locus of control where it must ultimately reside, within the individual, which is an excellent segue into doing what you know.

Doing What You Know: Executive Functioning

Once one has established firm patterns, *one knows what to do*. However, *knowing what to do* and *doing what you know* are two neurologically separate tasks. Doing what you know may be referred to as executive functioning and involves the frontal lobes of the brain. Given this neurological division of labor, it is not surprising that knowing what to do does not automatically translate into doing what you know. There are however a number of techniques that can help with this translation.

Consistency helps children do what they know

Consistency of time and consistency of place are two powerful organizers of our environment. Have you ever noticed the subtle routines that direct your action? Do you check your email at a certain time of the day? Do you typically brush your teeth right after you wash your face in the morning? These are routines that make one more efficient. If a certain time of the day prompts email behavior and washing one's face prompts teeth brushing, then one does not have to take up valuable brain space planning these behaviors. Rather, they are default settings that automatically begin at a certain time or after a certain action. As caregivers, if we provide a predictable and routine environment to our charges, then we are providing built in prompts to do what you know. For example, always asking for homework at the outset of class or having dinner at a regularly appointed time followed by study time are powerful behavioral vitamins we can bestow.

Am I a consistent care giver?

The following questions may help us decide whether as caregivers we are providing a consistent environment:

What rituals do I have at school as a teacher or at home as a parent?
Are my emotional responses to behavior predictable?
Can my students/child predict what I will be doing at a given point?
Are my students/child becoming more independent?
Do I find it easier over time to function as a teacher/parent?
Can I predict what my students/child will be doing at a given point?

Values help us do what we know

Initially *doing what you know* is prompted by *external* structure. How often do caregivers say, *Don't forget your homework, Be sure to take a shower, or Remember to take out the trash.* The caregiver assumes the role of the frontal lobe, directing one's charges to *do what they know*. Over time, however, the goal is to make structure and routine *internal*, so that the individual can take charge of their own behavior.

Our values form a critical part of *internal structure. Doing what you know* occurs more readily if the action is consistent with one's values. Each day we make many decisions based on our values, whether it is to be patient or rude, punctual or late, honest or shifty, or generous or stingy. Values are like an internal compass, subtly navigating us in a certain direction, and importantly, using values to navigate behavior can be taught! Let me show you how.

Core Values Exercise

Have you ever thought about the values that are most important to you? In other words, what are your priorities in life? Strong personal values will guide you through life and help you decide how to act. When you do things that are consistent with your values, how do you feel? When you do things that are inconsistent with your values, how do you feel?

The following is an example of one person's values:

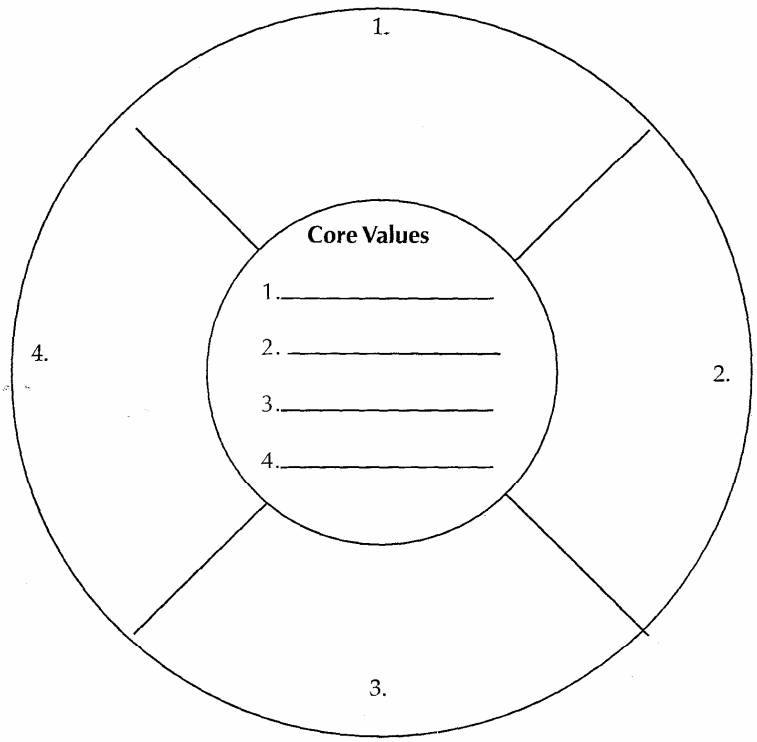
1. have time for fun

2. get my homework done on time

3. don't rush so much in the morning

4 less tension and confusion in my life

List your four most important values in the inner circle, or the **core** of the circle. Then, in the outer circle give an example of things you do, or want to do, to live according to your core values. For example, using the values noted above, have you noticed how you feel when you complete your homework on time? Place the completed Core Values circle in a place that will allow you to notice it daily. Pay attention to what you are doing when things go smoothly or feel good – they will become great action skills or routines to remember and keep doing! This is a great exercise to do with your child. You each might fill out a Core Values circle and discuss your results with each other.



Use non verbal techniques to help your child do what he knows

Internalizing structure and routine is enhanced by increasing the variety of teaching modalities used. Multisensory instruction is the standard when teaching individuals with learning differences. To internalize learning, the reluctant reader must say the sound /a/ while tracing the letter with his finger, and the struggling math student may need much opportunity with number lines before she can master addition. It is not surprising then that the individual with difficulty consistently doing what he knows could also benefit from a multisensory approach. To do this, one might present a small, two inch by two inch wooden block as a symbol for structure and routine. This object can be seen, touched, and written upon. On each face of the block the student is instructed to write a different routine to work on. Stickers with visual images and color coding are used for individuals who have difficulty processing words. Children we have worked with have written or drawn desired routines such as *smile, change my clothes every day, do my homework,* and *walk the dog,* on the block. Then the block is put in a spot where it can be seen and/or touched (on the kitchen table, on one's dresser, car dashboard) as a way of prompting the individual to do what they know.

Become aware of how you do things

Doing what you know becomes easier if one is aware of how they act and uses this awareness to monitor behavior. For example, if a child knows that she has a poor sense of time, she may check the clock when she goes to the bed room to get dressed for school, or if a child knows he easily becomes disengaged in class, he may write himself a reminder to hand in his homework before leaving. In each case, awareness of how one acts prompts an adaptive response. This is similar to the concept of *metacognition*, that is awareness of how one thinks and using that knowledge to take control of and direct their thinking process (Turnbull, et.al. 2004). As caregivers we may only too readily provide our charges feedback regarding how they act. "Why don't you ever finish things?" or "Why don't you think before you act?" are common, well-meaning but sadly ineffectual responses we all have uttered at times of exasperation. While providing us momentary relief of our frustration, they often leave the child feeling more ashamed and more "stuck." Alternatively, Beach (2004) includes an *Action Survey* that prompts the caregiver and the child in a nonjudgmental way to have conversations about how the child goes about doing what he knows, resulting in a teachable, not preachable moment!

To use this survey find a quiet, non stressed time with your child. Discuss what the various skills mean and give examples if you can. Ask the child to rate himself according to the scale (1-3) and that you will do the same. Afterwards discuss the results and where you agree and where you disagree. If there are significant areas of disagreement, agree to watch these areas for a few days and then get back together and see if your observations are more similar. If there are skills rated as "urgent help needed," talk about what would be helpful.

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ACTION SURVEY

1 GREAT ACTION SKILLS 2 ACTION NEEDED – NOT URGENT 3 URGENT HELP NEEDED

SKILL	RANGE	SELF ASSESSMENT	OTHER
1. **Organization**	Organized … Disorganized		
2. **Thinking Ahead**	Plan & Prepare …"Wing-It"		
3. **Perseverance**	Follow Through …Give Up		
4. **Efficiency**	Efficient…… Inefficient		
5. **Consistency**	Excellent ...…..... Poor		
6. **Reactivity**	Calm……..…Tense		
7. **Self-Monitoring**	Present …… Absent		
8. **Energy**	Appropriate…Inappropriate		
9. **Sense of Time**	Aware …… Oblivious		
10. **Satisfaction**	Satisfied ..... Unsatisfied		
11. **Participation**	Engaged…….. Disengaged		
12. **Action**	Planned …… Impulsive		
13. **Routine**	Has routines…No routines		
14. **Communication**	Clear ……Misunderstood		

Implicit in this discussion of the development of behavioral fluency is the concept of relationship. One cannot develop fluency alone. Returning to the reading analogy, Shaywitz (2003)

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writes that "all dyslexics who have become successful by any account share in common the unfailing…support of their parent(s) or, occasionally, a teacher or spouse." The exercises mentioned in this article give the helping adult the words and activities that will lead to the same type of relationship with those who struggle with behavioral fluency.

Those for whom behavioral fluency comes naturally may wonder why it is so difficult for some individuals to consistently meet obligations. However, as we have seen, knowing what to do and doing what you know are complex neurological phenomena that require the same depth of expert interventions that the dysfluent reader requires. It may be hard work to build behavioral fluency. However, it is often the link between goals and accomplishments, between just being smart and actually doing it.

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John Beach, M.Ed., is a licensed educational psychologist and certified special education teacher. He has over 30 years experience in the field of learning disabilities and learning differences; as a public school special educator and school psychologist, as a consultant to a hospital based evaluation team, and as headmaster at a private residential school for students with complex learning disorders. He, along with his wife, is the co-founder and co-director of Bridges Associates, Inc., a not-for-profit organization located in Yarmouthport, MA on Cape Cod. Bridges helps children and adults who learn differently to take charge of their lives, by providing evaluation, consultation and training. John Beach, with his wife, developed the Take Charge! Coaching method. He has presented Take Charge! and other topics to local, regional and national audiences including AET, LDA and CHADD.