ERRORLESS COMPLIANCE TRAINING
(compiled by T. Bolick)

"Errorless compliance training" is based upon the work of Ducharme and others in the field of developmental disabilities. These researcher/clinicians noted several important aspects of the compliance process:

- Behaviors that initially appear to be noncompliance may actually represent developmental incompetence.
- Many children have not yet established the "response set" of following an adult's direction on demand.
- Even when the child has learned that a direction is something to be followed, he/she may not understand what the adult is telling him/her to do.
- The adult's attempts to prompt compliance may inadvertently reinforce undesired behaviors.
- The adult's expectations of noncompliance affect his/her communication to the child and can hinder compliance.

An Example

Johnny is playing with trains during a break from his discrete trials programs. His teacher, Mrs. McGirt, expects that Johnny will have difficulty putting away the trains and returning to work. She wisely provides visual supports for Johnny's transition, showing him the train visual and telling him that it's time to put away trains when the engine tokens are gone. Mrs. McGirt then shows Johnny the chart and has him take off an engine token at one-minute intervals.

When the last token has been removed, Mrs. McGirt states, "Trains are all done. It's time to clean up." Johnny moves slowly to put away his trains. Mrs. McGirt, fearing that Johnny will balk, begins to talk more. "Johnny, pick up your trains. It's time to work." After less than 10 seconds, she says, "Johnny, it's time to pick up your trains and check your schedule." After 10 more seconds, Mrs. McGirt warns, "Johnny, if you don't pick up your trains, you won't get to play with them later."

While Mrs. McGirt's prompts were well-intentioned, they actually served to derail Johnny. He had to stop what he was doing in order to process each verbal direction. Each direction was different enough from the one before that Johnny became confused. Additionally, each direction stretched the cleaning up time a little longer, inadvertently reinforcing delay tactics.

Errorless compliance would have led Mrs. McGirt to have the train bin close by when she showed Johnny the engine token chart. After she said, "Trains are all done," she could hold the train bin out to Johnny and say, "Put in." Since putting items in a bin is an overlearned response for Johnny, he would be likely to put the train in. Mrs. McGirt could then reinforce Johnny for each train car or track piece that he put in the bin (repeating the "Put in" prompt as needed). Then, when the trains were in the bin, Mrs. McGirt could give the direction, "Put on shelf," and point to the labeled location. Once Johnny accomplished this action, Mrs. McGirt could tell him to check his schedule.

Setting up an errorless compliance program

1. Create a hierarchy of directives that the child follows, designating each directive in order of the probability of the child following it (e.g., "Eat cookie" is likely to be a directive that the child follows almost 100% of the time). These directives should be well within the child's level of competence and quite reinforcing.

2. With the team, decide what to call the period of the time when you're focusing on compliance.
3. Make an icon for the activity and put it on the child's visual schedule.
4. Start the activity by showing the icon and saying, "It's time for <compliance activity>."
5. Begin with directives that are 90 to 100% likely to be followed. Provide enthusiastic praise for each instance of compliance. If the child does not follow the directive, move on to the next one. (The goal is to create positive behavioral momentum.)
6. If a child fails to comply with an easy directive, repeat that directive after the child has succeeded in following three to five other directives in a row.
7. Always end on a success, even if you have to drop back developmentally in order for the child to be successful.
8. Tell the child to check his/her schedule, ensuring that a highly preferred activity follows the compliance activity.
9. When the child is following high probability directives successfully, begin to intersperse more challenging directives. (The consultant or behavior specialist will help with deciding when and how to do this.)
10. Always introduce the more difficult directive in the compliance activity right after the child has created positive behavioral momentum with high probability items.
11. Simultaneously, begin to generalize the high probability directives to contexts other than the structured compliance time.
12. Additionally, if the child is having difficulty in another activity, introduce a few compliance tasks to help him/her get back on track.

Strategies for generalizing compliance

1. Unless the team determines otherwise, it is appropriate to intersperse a high probability compliance task whenever a child is "stuck" in resistant mode.
2. If you do introduce a compliance task (which is usually easier than the task at hand), be sure to return to the original directive eventually.
3. For some children, the original directive is difficult to follow because it involves multiple steps. If this is the case, use compliance tasks to reduce the "load" of the original directive (such as with Johnny and "put in" in the example above).
4. Take advantage of the child's need for closure/completion, if present. For example, Suzi can't stand to have incomplete puzzles. She also doesn't like to leave floor time to come to the table. Her therapist learned to put a puzzle with two missing pieces on the table. She then gave one missing piece to Suzi. Suzi immediately went to the table to put in the piece. The therapist held out the last piece until Suzi sat down at the table. When the puzzle was complete, Suzi was praised, positive behavioral momentum was established, and the next activity was begun.
5. Whenever possible, give directives that the child can follow and wants to follow. Sometimes it's just in the phrasing.
6. Make sure that your directives are directive.