Skill Building: “The Practice Academies”

One of the most successful techniques to use with ADHD and/or defiant children is to help them practice the skills and procedures that they fail to use. We refer to these practices as "Practice Academies." The purpose of an “academy” is to practice a desired behavior so that the child really learns it. Having the child learn to implement a procedure/skill by repeatedly practicing it, becomes both a consequence and an ordeal, but most of all, a skill builder. Here’s how to do a Practice Academy:

1. **Name That Practice Academy**
   When a child misbehaves or fails to engage in a desired behavior, calmly say to him what *his* behavior is telling you about what he needs, *not* what you are going to do. Figure out what behavior you WANT and start your sentence with, "Your behavior is telling me you need a (desired behavior) Practice Academy."
   **For example:** (said with sadness or unemotionally) "Uh oh! Your behavior is telling me that you need a ‘Cleaning your room’ Practice Academy."
   **Remember: It Is How You Say It.** (Use sadness in your voice, or at least be calm. This is 9/10th of the battle, otherwise it can turn into a struggle between you and the child.)

2. **Pick A Time**
   Select a time when it would be convenient for *you* to supervise him. He needs to practice until he has clearly mastered the procedure/skill *and* is bored. The best time to get his attention and make the learning more effective is during a time when your child would rather be doing a favorite activity such as: playing with friends, watching his favorite television program, or going to soccer practice. If you are a teacher, the best time may be during recess, lunch, or after school. Determine which time you think will have the most impact on the child.

3. **Practice, Practice, Practice!**
   Practice repeatedly (e.g. at least 5-8 times *after* mastery), until he has clearly mastered the procedure/skill *and* is bored. Having him practice until he is bored helps him learn the skill better since he is learning to handle his frustration and complete a task at the same time. After all, that is what the problem was in the first place.
   ✦ Remember, practice doesn’t make perfect. *Perfect practice makes perfect.* So have your child practice the task perfectly many times and with a good attitude.

4. **Be patient.** Do not expect children to have mastered the desired behavior or skill after one “academy.” A Practice Academy may need to be repeated several times over several days and again, at various times throughout the year. Only have them practice when they show the problem behavior. Permanent behavior change will occur gradually.
HERE’S HOW AN ACADEMY MIGHT GO:

Problem behavior: Your child is constantly late for school because he is not getting up and getting ready on school mornings.

1. You respond, “Uh oh! What your behavior is telling me is that you need a ‘getting up and ready’ Practice Academy. Don’t worry about it, I have time to let you practice it this afternoon after school.”
2. After school, instead of letting him watch T.V. or play outside, instruct him that it is time to do his Academy. (The more favored the activity, the greater the impact of the Practice Academy.)
3. Have your child get in his pajamas, turn the lights out and lie in bed. After 30 seconds, you announce that it is time for him to get up. With a good attitude, he will get up, get dressed, brush teeth, come downstairs, pretend to eat cereal, get backpack on and tell you that he is ready. You must monitor this entire process.
4. Next, tell him he did a good job and to “undo” it and get back in bed. Your child is then to put the backpack away, go upstairs, undress, get in pajamas and crawl into bed pretending that he is asleep. At that point, you again wait 30 seconds and announce it is time to wake up and he starts the entire process over again.

The purpose of a Practice Academy is two-fold:

- To teach your child a skill
- and/or-
- To motivate your child to use that skill