



## CONTENT

1

AUTOMATICITY

# NEWSLETTER

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## AUTOMATICITY

We do innumerable things day in and day out, and we do them all subconsciously. For instance just think of today morning when you were brushing, were you focusing on how you were doing it or were there other things on your mind. Every time you leave home to go to your regular grocery store, are you consciously watching where you're going or is the road to the shop so ingrained in your subconscious that your footsteps automatically take you there? This gives you some extra time to catch up on a phone call with a friend or plan the dinner meal that you want to cook. Our brains can actually go on auto pilot mode, when an activity is so familiar we can do it without even thinking. Have you ever paused to think how some of these activities have become this automatic and subconscious?

Our ability to do things on autopilot does not come to us overnight. It begins to develop very early on in life. As we grow, we explore our environment. In the process of exploration, we gain sensory experiences that assist learning. The more experiences we have, the more refined our skills get and the more autopilot these tasks become. This ability to carry out routine based tasks so effortlessly, without relying on any cues is what we call automaticity! It takes some effort in the beginning but gradually becomes innate and ingrained, so much so that it eventually is subconscious. But, how do we reach from point A to B? Though it looks so easy it involves a process of skill development and mastery.

Having said this, let's look at it from a child's point of view. Think of your child's morning routine; let's pick a simple task of say dressing self. How dependent is your child on you for dressing himself? Do you have to do it for him or you have to keep reminding him to get started?



**Automaticity is the ability to perform a task with little attention.  
Both driving and reading require automaticity.**

Once he starts, do you have to repeatedly remind him the steps to wear the shirt? After all this back and forth, even though your child manages to dress himself, these prompts make him overtly dependent. Your child's reliance on cognitive cues to finish the task causes him to spend extra time and effort to do a simple activity, which can cause



anxiety and make the tasks furthermore time consuming. Also, in the process of trying hard to remember the strategies, he gets so wound up that he is unable to focus on the task and refine skills to ensure further learning.

Most of our children haven't honed their automaticity even for basic/routine tasks. They struggle through this process as they lack efficient sensory processing, some crucial motor skills and/or face attention challenges. Their difficulties hamper their innate learning and in order to complete most of their tasks they require help from caregivers/familiar adults, in the form of visual and/or verbal cues, reminders or other cognitive strategies. For instance when a child is using a lot of mental energy to decode words, she doesn't have much left over to focus on the meaning of what she is reading. As decoding and word recognition becomes automatic, she is able to read for comprehension. Going back to the task of wearing the shirt, the child who is relying on cognitive cues will have to spend time on figuring the front side and the back side of the shirt, he/she may require cues to remember their left and right as well. All this thinking and then doing can be quite frustrating.

Automaticity is a critical component for learning. When we are able to perform lower-level skills on autopilot, we free up the brain to engage in more complex forms of thinking. Now we are spending less time, energy and effort that we can utilize to do other tasks; such as while dressing your child can now think about what he wants to eat for breakfast, or revise for a test in school or make a conversation with mom narrating the events of the day, etc.

Once skills are learned and mastered a child can utilize them in various settings, i.e. the child's understanding of right and left will help her not just while dressing, but also whilst doing so many other tasks such as writing in school, or playing catch in the playground etc. This tells me that automaticity is also essential for skill generalization.

Now that we know the importance of this, let's see how we can build it. Focus on teaching him/her the foundational skills and train the skill in different ways. The more we perform a skill, the more automatic it will become. Deliberate, focused practice, with plenty of repetition, will help us achieve automaticity. But don't push it. Forcing your child can lead to anxiety, which will further impede learning. Go at the pace of your child. Be cautious as to when you may need to step in or take a step back. But keep going as with practice and different experiences your child will be able to perform tasks with fluidity and ease so that they can enjoy a stress free day at home, in school, playground and other social settings.

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*“Deliberate focus, repetition and practice will help achieve automaticity.”*



For any question or concerns regarding the newsletter please write to us on: [reachtcfc@gmail.com](mailto:reachtcfc@gmail.com)

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