

Preference Assessments

AN INTRODUCTION FOR EDUCATORS



INTRODUCTION

This tip sheet is designed to provide a brief introduction to preference assessments. Its purpose is to help educators understand what preference assessments are, why identifying preferences is important, and how to implement formal and informal preference assessments in the classroom.

Upon review of this tip sheet, readers will have an increased understanding of the following:

- What a preference assessment is.
- How to gather information about student preferences.
- How to choose which preference assessment is most appropriate for students in the classroom.
- How to incorporate students' preferences throughout their school day.

Identity-first language is used throughout this tipsheet. For more information visit: triad.vumc.org/identity-language.



What is a preference assessment?

A preference assessment is an observation or trial-based evaluation that allows educators and other practitioners to determine a “preference hierarchy,” or a ranked list of items or activities, based on preference. A preference assessment can be used to guide practitioners in determining which stimuli (e.g., toys, edible items, activities) may act as a reinforcer to increase future behavior.

How might conducting preference assessments benefit my autistic student?

Allowing students to advocate for preferred activities creates an environment built around choice and trust. It also increases motivation by allowing students to communicate desires for their preferred activities and choices. Further, preference assessments can be used by educators in many ways. By better understanding your students’ preferences, you can incorporate interests into your instructional context. By pairing yourself and your classroom with preferred items and activities, you can build better rapport with your students and create a learning environment where students are motivated to engage. Further, by understanding preferences, you are better able to set up the environment to maximize engagement. For example, you might:

- ❑ offer preferred items during challenging parts of the day, such as bouncy seating or fidgets during a small group activity, to help a student be happy, relaxed, and engaged during those activities (this is also known as “noncontingent reinforcement”) for more information, visit triad.vumc.org/behavior-services
- ❑ offer preferred items or activities following challenging activities, such as giving high fives and stickers after completing a race in the

gym, to increase likelihood that the student will choose to participate (also known as “contingent reinforcement”)

- ❑ alternate between activities that are more and less preferred, to motivate and engage students through challenging activities (e.g., playing a classroom game like “Seven Up” after a difficult math class)

What is the difference between a preferred item/activity and a reinforcer?

Although preference assessments can give us valuable information about what items and activities may be preferred by a student, it is important to know the difference between a preferred item and a reinforcer. Preference assessments allow us to determine a *preference hierarchy* or an understanding of which items are preferred within a collection of items. However, a preferred item may not be *reinforcing* for a student. That is, they may not be more likely to engage in a task or appropriate behavior to access the preferred item. For example, if you conduct a preference assessment of art supplies for a student who doesn’t enjoy art, they might make selections during the preference assessment, but still be unwilling to complete tasks to earn the art supplies. Preferred items may also change from moment to moment, especially as a student becomes satiated (for more information on satiation, see page seven). Thus, it is important to choose items that are highly preferred for preference assessments and continue to monitor preference from moment to moment afterward.

How do I gather information on which items or activities to include in the preference assessment?

To determine which items or activities to include in the preference assessment, you must first have a better (good) understanding of your student’s preferences and interests then you can evaluate which are truly preferred during the assessment. Let’s explore some approaches for gathering information before conducting formal assessments. We’ll share several ways to



gather information directly from the student and/or those who best know the student, including informal and formal data collection methods. Whenever possible, it is recommended to gather data directly from the student about their preferences. Nobody knows the student better than themselves and incorporating student choice is a powerful way to increase student buy-in and help provide motivation and encouragement throughout the school day.

- ❑ **Communicate with the student:** If your student has the communicative skills to talk about their interests, you can ask them! You might ask about their favorite items, classroom activities, movie characters, and so on. You can also try offering items, activities, and forms of attention (e.g., praise, high fives) and observe their responses. If they engage with the item or respond positively, this might be something preferred by the student, particularly if they respond this way consistently across time.
- ❑ **Naturalistic Preference Observation:** You can also learn about your student's interests by observing them in their natural environments, like home and school settings. During a naturalistic preference observation, you will observe the student's engagement with items freely in their environment. For example, you may observe what your student chooses for free time after the morning meeting. You can do this informally to get a better sense of what the student likes, or you can conduct a formal assessment to determine a hierarchy of preferred items in the environment. Learn more about collecting data via observation in "Free Operant Observation" on page five.
- ❑ **Preference Data Inventory:** A preference data inventory uses a structured, question-and-answer format to gather input from the student. There are many types of questionnaires that can be tailored to the individual needs of your student, including using open-ended questions, picture choices, or multiple-choice questions. For example, a preference inventory might ask a student

which forms of attention they prefer—high fives, fist bumps, or singing songs. Sometimes there may be limitations on the amount of information that can be gathered from the student, due to the student's skill set or resources available in the classroom. For example, although the student might have a favorite TV show, you might not know this unless the student can describe it to you. It can be valuable to gather additional information from other people who know the student well.

- ❑ **Caregivers and family member interviews:** It is important that you incorporate caregiver perspectives when determining the type of preference assessment to conduct. A few ways to include caregiver feedback include caregiver interviews or take-home inventories to collect information about the students. Caregivers can provide insight on how students prefer to spend their time outside of school and what choices they make at home.
- ❑ **Incorporating perspectives of other people who know the student well:** Previous teachers, therapists, and related service providers can provide valuable information about student preferences to help determine items and activities that your student may have enjoyed in previous school environments. Collecting this information at the start of the school year, or prior to the student transitioning to your classroom, can allow opportunities to gather some previously identified preferences for the student.

At the close of this tip sheet, you will find more resources to assist with the information gathering phase of preference assessments. After you gather preliminary information about the student's interests, you can conduct a formal preference assessment. Typically, during a formal preference assessment, the teacher sets up planned opportunities for the student to engage with or choose different items, and the teacher collects data on how the child engages to draw data-based conclusions about their preferences.

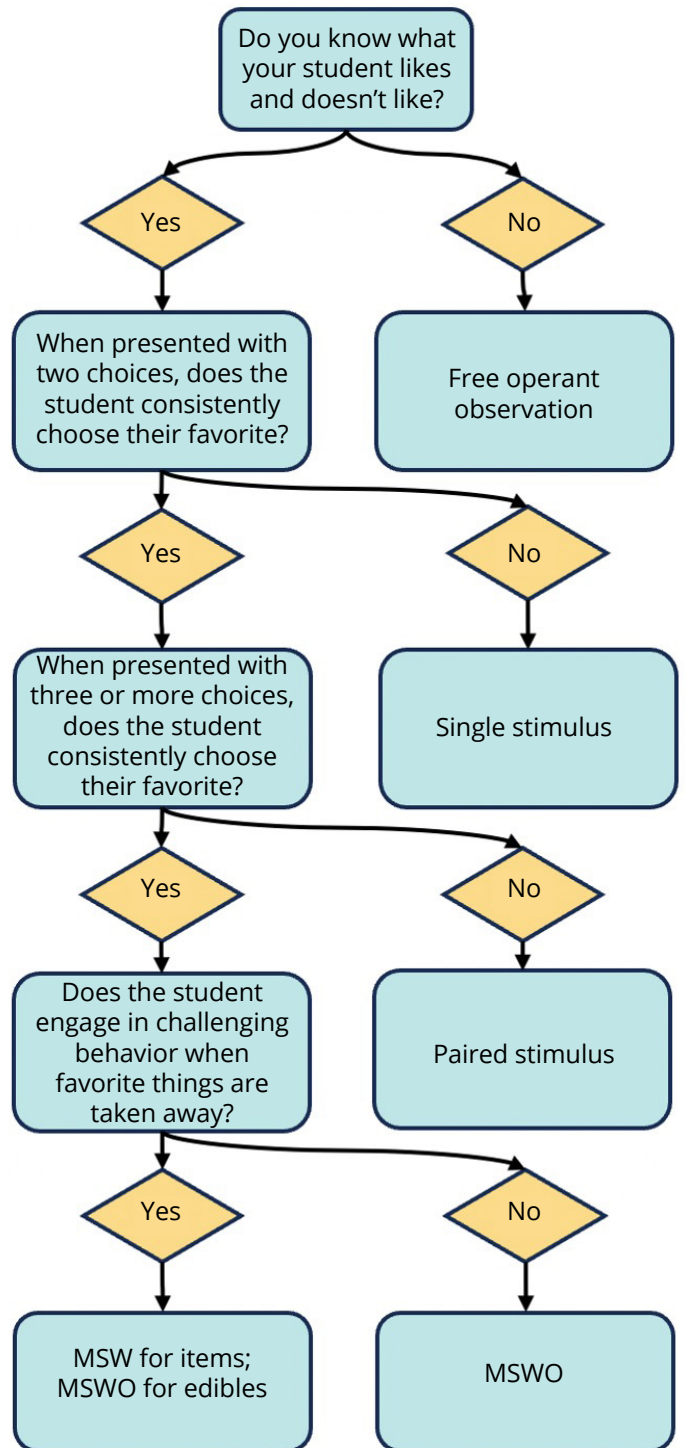


Are preference assessments limited to items like toys and foods? No! You can conduct preference assessments with many kinds of preferred stimuli, including types of attention (e.g., thumbs up, high five, words of praise), activities (e.g., favorite board games or leisure activities), and even people (e.g., favorite educators). For less concrete stimuli, you might consider using representative stimuli (e.g., photos or line drawings). For example, if you are assessing preference of different kinds of attention, you might have a picture of each type of attention, and then show the student what each picture means via modeling before or during the assessment. For initial assessments, it is recommended to keep the stimulus category consistent within a preference assessment. For example, you might conduct one assessment for edible items, one assessment for preferred items, and/or one assessment for types of attention. After you have a clear understanding of preferences, you may decide to mix stimuli in future assessments to better understand stimuli that have more value. For example, attention versus tangibles.

Are there different types of preference assessments, and which type is best for my student? Yes, there are many distinct assessments for measuring preference. When identifying the appropriate preference assessment that you would like to use with your autistic students in the classroom, it is helpful to consider their current skill repertoire, communication skills, and age. For example, with younger students, you can choose pictures, video examples, and item selection in the interview process to help identify preferences.

The most common preference assessments are free operant, single stimulus, paired stimulus, multiple stimulus with replacement (MSW), and multiple stimulus without placement (MSWO). To determine which preference assessment is most appropriate for your student, refer to the flowchart.




What type of preference assessment should I conduct?



Flowchart adapted from ebip.vkcsites.org/preference-assessments/



PREFERENCE ASSESSMENT METHODS

Free Operant Observation	The student is given free access to an enriched environment (e.g., classroom stocked with preferred items). The assessor observes the student and records the duration of time the student engages with each item or activity. Items engaged with for longer durations are considered to be more preferred.	Learn more at  ebip.vkcsites.org/free-operant/
Single Stimulus	Also known as a successive choice assessment, the assessor presents one item at a time, and records whether the student takes the item and the duration (e.g., seconds, minutes) that the student engages with the item. Items engaged with for longer durations are considered to be more preferred.	Learn more at  ebip.vkcsites.org/single-stimulus/
Paired Stimulus (MSW)	The assessor presents two items at a time, and records which item (if either) the student selects. The assessor presents pairs of items in a “round robin” style, and trials continue until every item has been paired with every other item. Items selected more frequently are considered to be more preferred.	Learn more at  ebip.vkcsites.org/paired-stimulus/
Multiple stimulus with replacement (MSW)	The assessor presents an array of items (often 3-4 items) and asks the student to choose one item. After the student is given time to engage with the item, the assessor returns the item to the array, rotates the order of the items, replaces a non-selected item with a novel item, and asks the student to choose another item. Trials continue until a predetermined criteria has been met (e.g., two presentations of each item) or until the student ceases to make selections. Items selected more frequently are considered to be more preferred.	Learn more at  ebip.vkcsites.org/multiple-stimulus-with-replacement/
Multiple stimulus without replacement (MSWO)	The assessor presents an array of items (often 5-7) and asks the student to choose one item. After the student is given time to engage with the item, the assessor does not return the item to the array, rotates the order of the array, and asks the student to choose another item. Trials continue until all items have been selected or until the student ceases to make selections. Items selected in earlier trials are considered to be more preferred.	Learn more at  ebip.vkcsites.org/multiple-stimulus-without-replacement/

Learn more with TRIAD’s “Preference Assessments” course. To access, first register for a free account at triad.vkclearning.org. If you already have an account login [here](#).



INCORPORATING PREFERENCES INTO THE STUDENT'S DAILY ROUTINES

Schedules

Incorporating student preferences into daily schedules not only enhances their overall learning experience but also cultivates a sense of respect and understanding for individual differences. Once you have identified your student's preferences, you can evaluate opportunities to include them in the daily schedule. This can be clearly indicated by having preferred activities on the daily schedule at a set time, incorporated into the end of an activity through a quick choice option to have access to preferences upon completion of a task, or to provide a break with preferences to enhance engagement and de-escalate behaviors.

Choices

Making choices that align with one's interests and preferences can be inherently satisfying. Students derive pleasure and fulfillment from being able to direct their own learning experiences, which may increase their desire to continue learning. Offer students choices in the types of activities they engage in to reinforce learning and incorporate student preference throughout the various activities in the school day. For example, for a student that is highly motivated when working with peers, a choice selection in language class may include the options of writing a short story, creating a presentation, or participating in a group discussion to demonstrate their understanding of the material. Having the choice of participating in group discussion incorporates their preference to work with peers and could help increase their engagement during classwork.

Another assessment to consider for student choice and the power of combining activities with preference is the Concurrent Operant Analysis (COA). This assessment allows students to choose between different scenarios of academic tasks while paired with various reinforcement options.



The results of a COA highlight which choices for setting up academic instruction may lead to higher engagement and decrease behaviors for autistic students.

Learn more with TRIAD's "Building Blocks of Communication" course. See Part 6 - Giving Choices. To access, first register for a free account at triad.vkclearning.org. If you already have an account login [here](#).

Reinforcement

Once you have defined preferences for your students, you have the tools to enhance opportunities for more frequent reinforcement in the classroom to encourage learning new skills, encouraging contextually appropriate behaviors, and transitioning to different activities throughout the school day. Professionals can pair these preferences with various reinforcement systems, such as token economies, self-monitoring systems, and first-then boards.

Learn more with TRIAD's "Reinforcement Systems" course. To access, first register for a free account at triad.vkclearning.org. If you already have an account login [here](#).



QUICK TIPS TO CONSIDER

What should I do if the student satiates on preferred items or activities?

As you identify preferences for your students, it is important to rotate items and activities to prevent satiation. This can occur after over-exposure to preferences, leading to less motivation or interest to obtain access to these items. One way to prevent satiation from occurring is to have a rotation of the preferred toys and activities. This may mean keeping some items out of the student's view or indicating that an item or activity is unavailable on choice boards and schedules.

What should I do if challenging behavior occurs while assessing preferences?

Sometimes challenging behavior can occur while assessing preferences. To help prevent challenging behavior from occurring, choose times to conduct preference assessments when your students are relaxed and engaged in the school day. If challenging behavior occurs, allow space for the assessment to stop and invite the student to participate at another time. Preference assessments allow the student to engage with you in a routine with access to desired activities, so it is important to build rapport through this assessment, recognize when frustrations are arising, and allow the student to disengage from the assessment in response to indicators of dysregulation or stress.

When should I conduct preference assessments, and how often?

A student's interests change over time, and it is important to identify how often you would like to assess preferences. Determining preferences for your students is not a one and done approach to utilize throughout an entire school year. Some individuals may need to have a preference check quickly before each instructional opportunity. Other students may indicate preference change through a decrease in engagement or behaviors around choices and items available after instruction. We recommend you conduct formal preference assessments regularly and continue to assess preference informally throughout each day.





As one example of how you might use formal and informal preference assessments in combination, you might conduct a preference assessment to determine a child's highest preferred items. You might create a choice board or choice menu (i.e., a printed grid of available choices), and use Velcro® to affix pictures of the student's preferred items. You could then use the menu throughout the day to stay updated on student preferences. You can also collect data on choices the student is making to determine if preferences shift over time and use the data to make subsequent decisions. For example, the student might first select various items from the choice board. If over time, the student begins selecting fewer items from the choice board, this may indicate that they are satiating on items or losing interest, and you might consider conducting a new preference assessment.

You should also conduct preference assessments prior to conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and/or creating a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). It is important to identify specific preferred activities or experiences that can be used as reinforcers within subsequent FBAs and BIPs. The FBA should include structured interviews or surveys completed by the student's teachers, parents, or school personnel who regularly interact with the student. Whenever possible, a student interview should also be included. For more information on FBAs and BIPs, please visit triad.vumc.org/behavior-services.



RESOURCES

TRIAD is a proud member of the Tennessee Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN) through the Tennessee Department of Education. Through this network, we provide interactive training and consultation for administrators, teachers, paraeducators, school psychologists, and other professionals serving Tennessee students, including autistic students, in K-12 school settings. Learn more at Triad.vumc.org/schools.

Free TRIAD Resources		
Web page	Behavior Services Free TRIAD autism training for educators in Tennessee triad.vumc.org/behavior-services	
Course <i>Login required</i>	Preference Assessments https://bit.ly/3TDbXMQ	
Course <i>Login required</i>	Building Blocks of Communication, Giving Choices https://bit.ly/4a9yCaQ	
Course <i>Login required</i>	Reinforcement Systems https://bit.ly/3PEFPas	

To access courses, first register for a free account or login to an existing account at triad.vkclearing.org. Then click on a link above or scan the QR code to launch.

REFERENCES

Chazin, K.T. & Ledford, J.R. (2016). Preference assessments. In *Evidence-based instructional practices for young children with autism and other disabilities*. Retrieved from ebip.vkcsites.org/preference-assessments