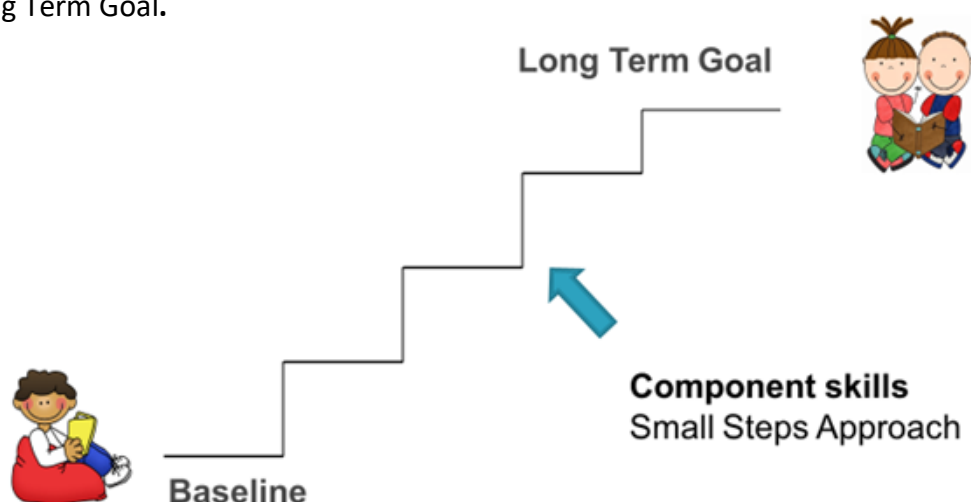


USING A SMALL STEPS APPROACH

WHAT IS THE SMALL STEPS APPROACH?

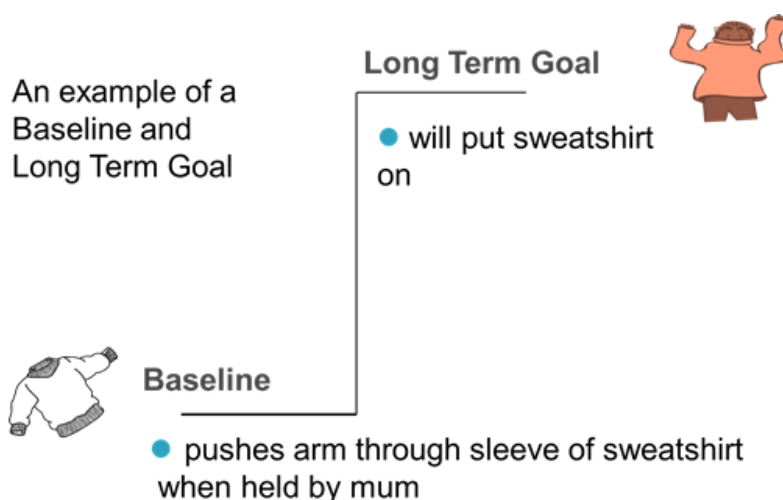
In the Portage Model, this is the breaking down of the Long Term Goal into smaller steps that will help a child reach that goal. These smaller steps are known as the **component skills**. To help break the Long Term Goal down, we can carry out a **task analysis**, which helps us identify the steps needed to move the child from their baseline to achieving the Long Term Goal.



TASK ANALYSIS

Task analysis is the breaking down of a Long Term Goal into smaller steps. Even a seemingly very straightforward task is quite complex once we start to think of it in terms of what a child actually needs to be able to do in order to carry out the task. In task analysis we identify the smaller steps that lead to the Long Term Goal.

An advantage of tackling a goal in this way is that it provides more opportunities to reward the child. As the child progresses through the steps, we can celebrate the successful achievement of each step instead of having to wait until he or she has accomplished the whole task.



Before we can do a task analysis, it is necessary to have information about what the child can do now (the baseline) and what we want him or her to be doing in the future (the Long Term Goal). It may sound very obvious that we need to know what he or she can do now, but it is surprising how often we make assumptions about a child's skills, plan our teaching on that basis and then discover that the child's abilities are, in fact, quite different.

COMPONENT SKILLS

The small steps that make up a task are called component skills. One way of identifying component skills is to observe someone competently performing that task and then to record the actions in sequence, to give a "slow motion" account of the task.

An example is given below.

Component skills in 'threading a large bead on to a lace'

[Materials: Large bead and a lace which has a knot at one end]

1. Pick up lace in one hand.
2. Hold unknotted end of the lace between finger and thumb with end protruding.
3. Pick up bead with other hand.
4. Push the end of the lace into bead.
5. Push the lace through to the other side of the bead.
6. Look for it coming through to the other side of the bead.
7. Feed the lace through so there is enough to grasp.
8. Let go of the bead (don't let the bead drop off the lace!).
9. Take hold of the unknotted end of the lace with the hand that was holding the bead.
10. Let go with the other hand.
11. Pull the lace up through the bead.

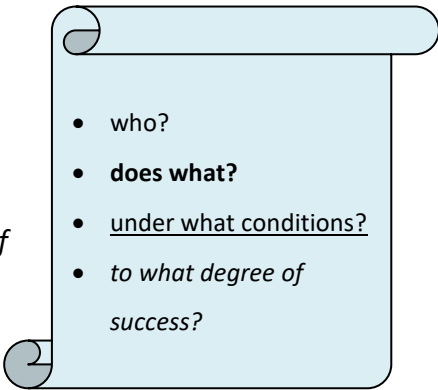
BREAKING DOWN A TASK INTO SMALL STEPS

Each task analysis is unique because it relates to a particular child, at a particular time, in a particular setting, working on a particular task, but there are some general guidelines that should apply.

We must:

- **ensure we know what the child's baseline is**
- **have a clear Long Term Goal that has been agreed with the family**
- **develop clear teaching targets for the child, based on the small steps they need to learn to help them achieve the Long Term Goal**
- **teach the small steps in a way that is meaningful for the child and family**

We need to remind ourselves of what is involved in writing a teaching target. To set clear teaching targets, we need to include information about 'who?', '**does what?**', 'under what conditions?' and '*to what degree of success?*'

- 
- who?
 - **does what?**
 - under what conditions?
 - *to what degree of success?*

To try to make a task easier for a child, one of the elements of a teaching target needs to be changed. We need to:

- change the **behaviour** (what the child is expected to do), or
- change the conditions (the prompts, materials, instructions and context), or
- change the *degree of success* (how much or how often the child does the task), or
- change a combination of these

The small steps to a Long Term Goal are different for each child. Identifying these steps depends on knowledge and experience of the child and their family. There is no single, 'correct' way to break down a task. If it works, it's right.

An important aspect of Portage is ensuring success for the child. An effective task analysis will increase the opportunity for the child to experience success. Our aim is to have steps that are small enough to be achieved in the short term.

CHANGING THE BEHAVIOUR

We may be able to break down the Long Term Goal by starting with an expectation that the child will only do part of the task and gradually increasing what we expect of the child.

Teaching the Small Steps from Easiest to Hardest

One way of making a task easier for a child is to identify the small steps that make up a more complex task and then to think about the order in which we will teach them. For any child, some parts of the task will be easier than others. We can order the tasks from easiest to hardest. We teach the easiest first and share the task with the child by doing the harder parts for them.

We must remember that, once again, there is no single, 'correct' way to do this. The order will vary depending on the strengths and needs of the individual child. Despite this, we may find that

- certain steps are best taught together
- learning one step may make learning the next one easier
- there may be some steps that are quite independent.

The over-riding principle is that we teach from easiest to hardest for each child. Many skills lend themselves to the child and adult sharing the task in this way, so that the child is taught the easy steps first and the adult carries out all the other parts of the task.

If we look at the small steps of the threading example, we can see some parts are much easier than others e.g. number 6, '*Looking for the bead coming through*' requires little

physical skill, just curiosity and attention. Small step number 11, '*Pull the lace up through the bead*' is also a relatively easy step. Therefore, a sequence of teaching targets for this threading task could be:

1. First Teaching Target (small step 6):

(who / does what) **Zarah will look for the lace coming through the bead**
(conditions) when an adult threads the bead and says, 'Look Zarah'
(degree of success) *for 3 out of 4 beads threaded.*

2. Second Teaching target (small steps 6 & 11):

(who / does what) **Zarah will look for the lace and pull it through**
(conditions) when an adult pushes the lace through the bead and says,
 'Zarah, pull it.'
(degree of success) *for 2 out of 4 beads threaded.*

If a child completes the last step(s) of an activity, they are rewarded by being the one to 'finish'. This is often more motivating for the child as he or she can see the end result. This is something to bear in mind when introducing a new activity, but will work well for certain activities or tasks more than others, e.g. bricks, dressing tasks, puzzles.

CHANGING THE CONDITIONS

When we talk about the conditions under which a child is asked to perform a task we are considering a whole range of strategies used by the adult to help the child be successful. These include: 1) what prompts are used, 2) the materials used, 3) what instructions are given and 4) the context.

We can break a task down into smaller steps by altering some or all of these. Remember that the size of the step depends on the child's current skill level, but each step should

be small enough to be achieved from one home visit to the next, or in settings they should be short term targets that are achievable within 1-2 weeks.

1. Prompts

Prompts can be used in order to make a task easier. Often, we do this without thinking. It is important to consider how much help is to be built into the task to ensure the child succeeds. We then fade out the help as it becomes no longer necessary. For example, it would be very appropriate to teach a child to dress himself by starting with many prompts built into the task. If the skill is to become useful, we must eventually move on to teach the child to do the task unaided.

We start by using the prompt which is least strong but will still help the child towards the target behaviour and then we fade or reduce the prompt as the child learns the skill. In other words, we are aiming to give the child a minimum but sufficient amount of help.

Prompts can take a number of forms. They are listed below in order of the help they give the child, from most to least:

Physical	• Anything done physically which helps the child make a successful response • E.g. holding a child's hand to guide through the action • This is often a useful first step as the child needs to do very little on their own
Imitation	• Doing the task so the child will imitate the desired response • This is particularly useful when a child is unable to respond to verbal directions alone
Visual / Gestural	• Any visual clues given to the child • E.g. pointing to the correct object for the child to choose, or providing dots to assist in writing
Verbal	• Anything said by the adult that produces the required response from the child • E.g. giving verbal instructions, or giving the child the first sound when trying to name an object

Often, adults give inadvertent visual prompts when verbally prompting, e.g. gesturing whilst giving a verbal command. It is important to be aware of this when trying to fade out prompts and promote the child's independence with a skill.

Changes can be made to the nature of each type of prompt, so as to gradually fade it out. For example, a physical prompt to support spoon feeding might initially be full hand-over-hand support, which is gradually faded to wrist support and then just a light touch on the elbow.

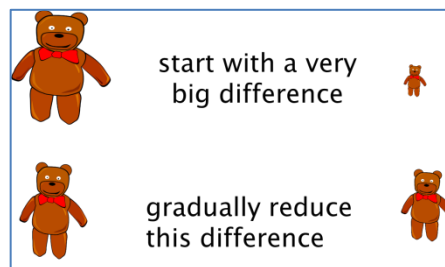
2. Materials

Fail-Safe Learning - This approach can be used when the Long Term Goal requires the child to discriminate or choose. The task is simplified by either reducing the element of choice so that the child is more likely to get the "right answer", or exaggerating the difference in the attribute you are teaching. Taken to its extreme, the first step in such a task analysis would be to present the child with only one choice so that there are no

other 'distracters'. Gradually the element of choice is re-introduced, by reducing the differences between the choices and/or by increasing the number of choices, until the Long Term Goal is reached.

Let's look at two examples to illustrate this.

- i) If we were teaching a child to discriminate between "big" and "little" we might emphasise the difference in size by starting with two objects which were as alike as possible in every way other than size e.g. a very big brown teddy and a very small brown teddy. You would then ask the child to "*show me the big one*". Gradually, we would make the teddies more and more similar in size until the child was discriminating at the desired level.



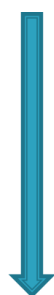
Exaggerating the difference in the attribute you are teaching, e.g. 'big' and 'little'

- ii) If we were teaching a child to "*select a red brick*" we might vary the choice. Initially we might offer only red bricks. We could then gradually introduce other colours until the child was selecting a red brick from a choice of three colours.

Grading materials - In this approach, we simplify the task by grading the materials we use. We then move towards the Long Term Goal, progressively making the task more difficult. Grading materials is often used when we are teaching a task involving motor co-ordination, e.g. threading.

Another way of describing this approach is to say that we start with a very easy version of the final task and gradually approximate or shape the behaviour towards the target behaviour.

For example, in a threading activity we can change the materials to progressively increase the expectations on the child:



hoops	+	wooden spoon
large beads	+	thin rod
large beads	+	stiff lace
small beads	+	thin cord
small beads	+	thin lace

3. Instructions

We can make a task more or less difficult by the instructions we use.

Modelling - The adult completes the task and leaves a concrete example for the child to copy. For example, we might build a tower of 3 bricks and leave it for the child to see. We would give the child another three bricks and ask him or her to build a tower.

Demonstration - The adult completes the task and the child imitates the action without the concrete example. For example, we might demonstrate building the tower of three bricks and then give the child the same three bricks and ask her to build a tower.

Modelling and demonstration are always accompanied by verbal instructions.

Verbal - Only verbal instructions are used. For example, we give the child three bricks and ask her to build a tower. Signing may accompany verbal instructions if this is appropriate for the child.

Another factor is the actual language that is used. It is important to tailor this to the child's individual needs and learning style.

4. Context

This refers to the place, the people or the time. Changing this aspect of a task is particularly helpful when working on social skills. To make the task easier for the child, we would start with a simpler or less demanding context and gradually change this until the Long Term Goal is reached. The example below illustrates this.

take turns with 1 child with adult help in home corner

take turns with 2 children with adult help in home corner

take turns with 3 children with adult help in home corner



It is important to remember where it is most appropriate to learn a new skill and build this in to the teaching if possible.

CHANGING THE *DEGREE OF SUCCESS*

Again, we often do this without thinking in order to make a task easier for a child. We give the child longer in which to do the task or we accept a less frequent rate of success. By using these techniques systematically, we can gradually increase the difficulty level of the task as the child learns.

When doing task analysis, we may want to consider changing the success criteria in one or more of the following ways:

- alter the **time allowed** for task completion, e.g. *child will put on socks in 2 minutes then in 1 minute*

- alter the **duration** of the task, e.g. *child will sit unsupported for 30 seconds and then for 1 minute*
- alter the **frequency** of successful completion, e.g. move from “*child will select red object 1/10 tries*” to “*child will select red object 9/10 tries*”, or move from “*child will spoon feed 3 spoonfuls once a day*” to “*child will spoon feed 3 spoonfuls at every meal*”.

COMBINING TECHNIQUES

Typically, identifying the small steps in an activity will not rely on changes in just one aspect of the specific teaching target but will incorporate changes in **behaviour**, changes in conditions and changes in the *degree of success*.

Here is an example of a task analysis, with the **behaviour**, conditions and *degree of success* clearly identified. Notice how some or all of them will change throughout the sequence of small steps:

BASELINE:	Annie will put teddy in a box <u>when adult says, “Annie, put teddy away now, bye-bye teddy” and guides her hand and teddy to the box</u> <i>4 out of 5 times.</i>
1.	Annie will pick up teddy and put him in the box <u>when adult points to the box and says, “Annie, tidy away now”,</u> <i>3 out of 5 times.</i>
2.	As above, but add Annie will pick up a car and put it in the box <u>when adult says, “Annie, tidy away the car now” and points to the car and the box,</u> <i>2 out of 5 times.</i>
3.	Annie will put the teddy and the car in the box <u>when adult says, “Annie, tidy away now” when they are placed near the box,</u> <i>3 out of 5 times.</i>
4.	Annie will put the teddy, the car and three other toys in the box <u>when mum says, “Annie, tidy away now” with the box nearby,</u> <i>4 out of 5 times.</i>
5.	Annie will put a range of toys in the box <u>when adult says “Annie, tidy up now” when the box is up to five feet away</u> <i>4 out of 5 times.</i>
LONG TERM GOAL:	Annie will put toys away <u>when adult says “Annie, tidy up now”.</u>

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN IDENTIFYING SMALL STEPS

Here are some questions to ask yourself when you are trying to break down a Long Term Goal into small steps that are achievable for the child.

- Are you clear about the baseline and Long Term Goal?
- Can you work out the small steps from baseline to Long Term Goal?
- Which prompts will be most helpful to begin with?
 - physical? visual? verbal?
- How will you fade out the prompts?
- Can you reduce the number of choices for the child?
 - initially having no or very few options and later introducing more to choose from
- Do the materials need to be graded to shape the child's behaviour towards the Long Term Goal?
- What instructions will we give the child?
- In what context will the task be easiest to carry out?
- Should the degree of success be varied?
 - time allowed to complete the task
 - length of time the task will last
 - frequency of successful achievement of task

It is important to remember that identifying the small steps required for learning is a tool we use to help us. It is not a ritual we carry out at the beginning and then forget about. We would usually only plan the first few steps, and then re-assess what needs to be done next. We may need to amend the steps we have devised for the child several times along the way towards a Long Term Goal. Steps can always be altered; it is the analytical approach that is important.
