

Information Resource: Travel Training

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Why you care about travel training

For most of us, walking out of our home to run an errand is an everyday activity which we take for granted. But many people with developmental disabilities are not allowed to do this, because they have been judged to “lack the capacity” for independent travel. This contributes directly to a downward spiral of absolute dependence, lack of control and consequent low self-esteem.

It does not have to be this way. [The Essential Guide to Safe Travel Training](#), written by Dr. Desirée Gallimore, lays out a path for individuals with developmental disabilities to travel independently—even individuals with very high support needs. Dr. Gallimore’s method is based on three decades of work assisting people with developmental disabilities. She has dealt with a wide variety of situations, and has come up with proven safe travel solutions for situations such as an individual who:

- cannot read.
- is non-verbal or has trouble making themselves understood.
- is impulsive.
- cannot calculate change.
- is a slow learner.

Dr. Gallimore claims her step-by-step system can be used to teach travel skills to individuals of any age or ability. Here’s the catch: **Safe and independent travel often requires a large investment from the trainer of one-on-one time, during which the trainer must be persistent and self-disciplined.** In many cases, the most appropriate travel trainer is a well-informed parent. Another option is a professional who already knows the student well, or who is willing to take the time to learn about their individual strengths and preferences.

Typical one-on-one travel training services available in New York State are eight to twelve sessions. In contrast, Dr. Gallimore’s case studies range from 19 weekly sessions for her most capable students, up to over one hundred for beginners. Those beginners are building important foundation skills, which often prove to be transferable to other routes.

The case studies presented in the book hold out tremendous hope. It is all laid out, step by step. You learn how to evoke learning, and how to recognize incremental progress. Two of those case studies are summarized on the last page of this document. Yes, it is also daunting—perhaps two years of effort, just to go to the local grocery store and pick up milk. But the time will pass no matter what, and you have a choice. Two years from now, will your individual have a larger life, greater freedom, and a broader horizon? Or will they just be two years older?

Next Steps

If you are a parent, read the book, and then put a training program in place for your loved one. If you are a professional, read the book, and then train your staff and the involved parents.

My son’s IQ tests out near 50, and my experience has been that the book by itself was enough. You might even find that this four-page summary is all you need. But, if you feel that you want more help after reading the book, Dr. Gallimore offers a variety of remote consulting services to support a customized travel training program. Her website: traveltrainingsolutions.org

Five Step Travel Training Method

Excerpted, with permission of author, from pages 37 & 38 of Safe Travel Training.
The book explains each step in great detail and is easy to understand.

1. **Understand your student.**

Each student has strengths and traits, skills and motivations, which will influence the program's goal, the travel route, and the way you teach the route. Knowing your student and understanding who the student is as a person is possibly the most important step in delivering successful travel-training. *There is no such thing as a generic travel-training program.*

2. **Establish the travel-training goal.**

A travel-training goal is an intention with a specific beginning and end.

For example: Pat will walk from her home to the corner shop to purchase an item of choice.

3. **Plan the route prior to teaching.**

Investigate the safest route, then consider the best way to teach it to a specific student.

In most cases, on the very first route you will want to start by teaching the last portion, so that early on the student will independently arrive at their destination.

4. **Teach the planned route.**

Teach the specific planned route using training techniques tailored to the student.

See Trainer Behavior, below, for more details on techniques.

5. **Fade out and allow your student to travel independently.**

After teaching the planned route, the trainer “fades out”—slowly withdraws.

The trainer must setup objective performance criteria, and then stick to them. For example, three consecutive trips executed without the need for intervention by the trainer.

After the student meets those criteria, they are able to travel the route safely.

Trainer behavior

Dr. Gallimore mandates specific behavior by the trainer. There is no such thing as a generic training program, but there are generic required trainer behaviors.

List below based in part on Top Tips for Trainers, pages 199 & 200 of Safe Travel Training.

a. **Meaningful.** Pick a meaningful destination.

Meaningful to the student. Asking them to travel to an arbitrary location will rarely be successful. Instead, a destination which has an intrinsic reward, such as travel to an activity which they value, or a store where they can buy a treat—or even travel home to rest and be alone.

b. **Learn.** Do your homework.

Know the route. Travel the route on your own. Determine what the challenges are, and decide how to address them. Know the student and anticipate their needs. Determine their strengths and weaknesses, and provide the aids they need to be successful. For example, a student who cannot communicate verbally could carry a flip book of laminated cards for situations which might come up, such as “Is this the M66 bus?”—or use their smart phone as a virtual flip book.

c. **Build in safety.**

Safety through teaching additional skills, and back-up strategies. For example,

- Skills: Phone parent upon arrival at destination.
- Backup strategy: When questions arise, find an appropriate person. Preferably someone in uniform, otherwise a woman with a baby carriage.

Safety through high visibility. Teach the habit of wearing or carrying something from the waist-up that is bright red, orange or yellow, such as hat, shirt, scarf, back pack, or bag.

d. **Focus** on the travel training task.

During the training, only interact with the student when needed to teach, prompt or intervene. Defer all conversation until the destination has been reached.

e. **Observe** carefully, and teach only when needed.

The ultimate goal is independent travel on a given route. To get there, observe the student's behavior carefully and allow them as much autonomy as possible at every stage. As early as the first time ever approaching the first red light, allow the student to be slightly in front of you and check whether they appropriately stop and wait for the light to change.

f. **Minimal prompting** when intervention is needed.

Give the individual as little guidance as needed, and taper it off as quickly as possible. For example, when teaching to stop at a red light the trainer should point at the light and state "the light is red, we must stop" and then lapse into silence.

g. **Repetition.**

Teach skills through repetition and reinforcement.
Primary means of reinforcement is appropriate praise.

h. **Reward behavior** through appropriate praise, with proper timing and dosage.

Like a prescription drug, praise is most effective when taken as directed. And like a pain-killer, it is vitally important to taper off. Many of us already know this from our readings and experience, but as trainers we have to rigorously practice it to get the benefits:

- Praise must be specific and concrete.
- Praise immediately after the behavior.
- Over time, reduce the frequency of praise, so the student must perform the skill consistently to earn the praise.

Building on the example of street crossing, as soon as the student takes a step forward into the road the trainer can state: "Excellent- you crossed after the light changed to green." But then in later sessions, do this only every 3rd light. As time passes, continue to taper off on the praise.

i. **Stand back.** Allow the student to problem-solve on their own while you observe.

The training method calls for fading out slowly— performing multiple sets of observations from steadily increasing distances. During some of those observations, the student will encounter problems or make minor mistakes. When that happens, resist the impulse to immediately intervene. Remember that the ultimate goal is complete independence on this route. By not intervening, you provide the opportunity for the student to demonstrate that they have the problem-solving skills needed to deal with the issues which come up. If they are successful, then you and the student will both have greater confidence in their ability to travel.

Case Studies

The book devotes a chapter to travel training case studies. This brings together the five steps, the trainer behaviors and the issues faced by a real student. This cements the learning, both for someone new to the field and for an experienced trainer looking to improve. Two case studies are summarized here. Before training someone, you might want to get a copy of the book and read the full details of all 9 case studies.

Here are the two “bookend” case studies. The two individuals, Greg and Rita, started from very different levels of experience. Both of them are borderline illiterate and easily confused by complexity and choices. Consequently, in both cases simple rules of thumb were used to choose a solution which was guaranteed to work.

- Greg had difficulty identifying which cashier line was the “optimum” choice. So instead he learned to simply always go to the same line—the one furthest from the door.
- Rita had difficulty determining which train to board, since several were heading to her destination each hour, and Rita cannot tell time or calculate differences. The simple rule of thumb for Rita was to always go to the information booth, and ask for the train that would be leaving in about 20 minutes—plenty of time for her to walk to any platform.

As a travel trainer, you will encounter similar issues, where the student lacks the cognitive skills needed to navigate a situation. In those cases, as a trainer you will need to reframe the problem, find the simple rule of thumb which results in a perfectly adequate solution. Figure out what is adequate and always easy to apply, rather than the “best” and most efficient.

Case study: Greg (15 year old)

Previous skills: No prior travel experience.

Route: From home to local shop, with no road crossings.

Skills learned: Using mobile phone, independent walking, purchasing an item in a shop.

Learning strategy: Route broken down into 4 segments, and taught in backwards order—starting with the payoff event of entering the shop and making an independent purchase. Phone buttons color-coded to teach 3 button sequence for calling Mom. To pick which of four cashiers to line up for, used simple strategy of always going to the same one, the one furthest from the door.

Number of sessions with active teaching of how to enter and purchase: 8.

Observations to verify success: 32 times total. 8 times from each of trailing 20 paces away, 40 paces, stationed at the shop door, and stationed outside. All this for the first of 4 segments.

Total, first lesson to independent travel of complete route w/out observation: **More than 100 sessions.**

Case study: Rita (43 year old)

Previous skills: An experienced traveler.

Route: From home to the city to meet friends at a cafe.

Skills learned: An unfamiliar multi-modal route—bus, train, and walking.

Learning strategy: Route broken down into segments and taught in forward order. The first part of the journey, riding bus to train station, was already familiar. Cue cards used to identify correct bus number. To select correct train platform, used strategy of always asking for help at the information booth.

Number of sessions with active teaching of overall route: 3.

Observations to verify success: 18 times total, from increasing distance.

Total, first lesson to independent travel of complete route w/out observation: **21 sessions.**