

High Density of Preferred Activities

Incorporating a high density of highly preferred activities and experiences is a well-supported and evidence-based strategy for teaching students with complex and challenging behaviours, especially in special school settings. This approach is rooted in principles of applied behaviour analysis (ABA), positive behaviour support (PBS), and engagement theory. Below is a detailed explanation from the published literature, highlighting key authors and practical examples.

Why Use High-Density Preferred Activities for Students with Complex Behaviours?

1. Increases Engagement and Reduces Problem Behaviour

Highly preferred activities increase on-task behaviour and reduce escape-motivated or attention-seeking behaviours.

Koegel, O'Dell & Dunlap (1988) demonstrated that incorporating child-preferred activities into instructional contexts significantly reduced disruptive behaviours in students with autism. The preference acted as a natural reinforcer, increasing participation.

Dunlap et al. (1994) found that embedding preferred stimuli (e.g., topics, materials) into routines reduced aggression and self-injury in students with severe disabilities.

Kern, Bambara, & Focht (2002) showed that increasing access to preferred activities within academic tasks reduced escape-maintained behaviour and improved learning outcomes.

Example: A student who frequently exhibits aggressive behaviour during transitions may remain calm and compliant when transitions are framed around a preferred activity (e.g., moving to the music room for drumming instead of math class).

2. Builds Positive Associations with Learning and School

Preferred activities create positive emotional experiences associated with staff, settings, and instruction. Carr, Levin, McConnachie, Carlson, Kemp, & Smith (1994) emphasize the use of non-contingent reinforcement—providing preferred items or activities independently of behaviour—to create calm and cooperative environments.

Horner et al. (2005) argue that increasing access to positive reinforcement, including high-preference activities, is a core component of Tier 3 PBS interventions for students with complex behaviour needs.

Example: A student reluctant to engage in communication sessions becomes more willing when sessions begin with a preferred video or sensory toy.

3. Supports Autonomy and Individual Needs

Allowing choice from among preferred activities promotes student autonomy, increases self-determination, and honours the student's unique profile of needs and preferences.

Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, et al. (2015) found that when students with intellectual and developmental disabilities were offered meaningful choices—especially of preferred tasks—they demonstrated greater self-regulation and motivation.

Sigafoos et al. (1995) showed that embedding choice-making and preferences into routines improved both task completion and emotional regulation.

Example: A student chooses between preferred sensory play or trampoline time after completing a short literacy task. This structure leads to reduced protest and increased compliance.

4. Promotes Skill Generalisation and Maintenance

Repeated engagement with highly motivating tasks facilitates retention and generalisation of skills, particularly for learners with high support needs.

Koegel & Koegel (2006) note that using motivational variables, such as preferred contexts and activities, increases the generalisation of language and social skills.

Alberto & Troutman (2013), in their work on applied behaviour analysis for teachers, emphasize that high preference routines serve as effective antecedent strategies and reinforcement tools in structured teaching.

Practical Implications for Special School Teachers

Strategy	Example
Use preference assessments	Identify top reinforcers regularly (e.g., toys, topics, people, places)
Embed preferences into lessons	Use a student's favourite characters in literacy stories or role-plays

Strategy

Offer choice and control
Balance effort with reward

Example

Let students choose the sequence of tasks or rewards from a visual menu
Use a “first-then” structure: First work, then highly preferred activity

Key References

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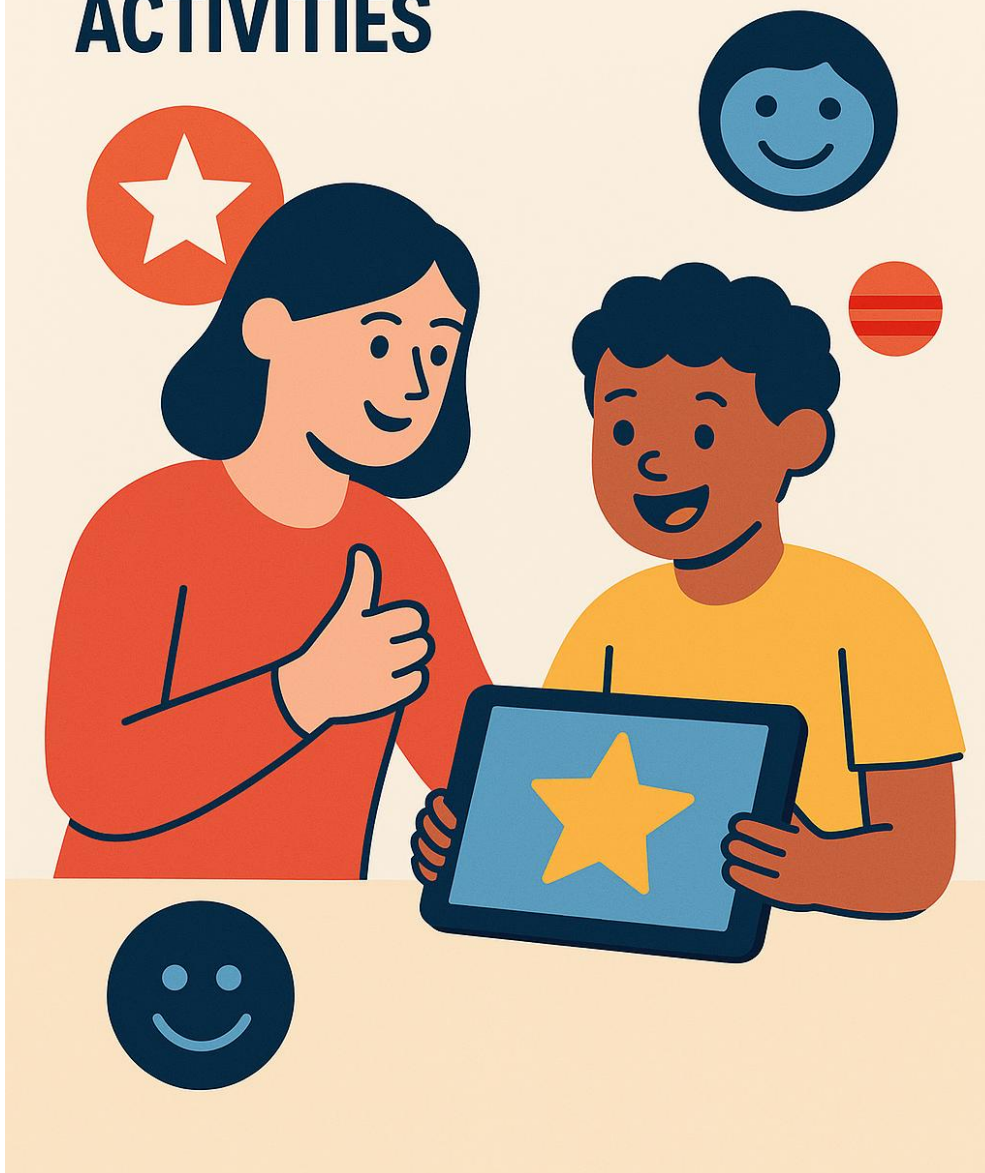
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DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT HIGHLY PREFERRED ACTIVITIES



Here's a template for identifying and scheduling highly preferred activities and contexts. It's designed to help special school teachers intentionally plan for students who require frequent access to reinforcing, motivating, and meaningful experiences—especially those with complex communication and behavioural support needs.

Student Preference & Engagement Planning Template

Section 1: Student Information

Field	Details
Student Name	

Field
 Year Level
 Date of Plan
 Teacher/Team
 Behaviour Support Needs Brief summary (e.g., escape-maintained behaviour, sensory needs, etc.)

Section 2: Identifying Highly Preferred Activities and Contexts

Area	Preferred Items/Activities	How Preference Was Identified	Notes
Sensory	e.g., water play, tactile objects	Observation, interest inventory	
Social	e.g., time with peers, adult praise	Interaction sampling	
Movement	e.g., trampoline, swinging	Student choice, engagement trials	
Communication	e.g., story time with PODD, AAC games	Response frequency	
Technology	e.g., tablet apps, music on iPad	Usage logs, requests	
Topics/Themes	e.g., dinosaurs, superheroes, animals	Thematic interest across tasks	
Environments	e.g., sensory room, garden, quiet space	Behavioural data, student initiation	

Tip: Update preference data every 4–6 weeks or when student interests shift.

Section 3: Scheduling Access to Preferred Activities

Time of Day	Routine/Activity	Embedded Preferred Activity	Delivery Method	Goal (Behavioural or Learning)
Morning arrival	Transition to classroom	Favourite greeting song	Non-contingent delivery	Calm entry, communication
Mid-morning	Literacy rotation	Use of book with favourite theme	With visual supports	Increased engagement
Snack break	Mealtime	Access to preferred seating or utensil	Student request (AAC)	Independence, communication
After work session	Transition	Trampoline break	Contingent on task completion	Task persistence
Afternoon	Group activity	Video on a favourite topic	Choice-based	Positive peer interaction

Balance both *non-contingent* (free access) and *contingent* (earned) preferred activities to meet student regulation and motivation needs.

Section 4: Monitoring & Adjusting

Question	Response
What worked well this week?	
Which preferred items lost appeal?	
Are adjustments needed based on mood/health?	
Did behaviour or engagement improve?	
Next review date	

Section 5: Team Communication & Responsibilities

Team Member	Role/Responsibility	Notes
Class teacher	Leads implementation	
Teacher aide	Delivers activities, observes preference	
OT/Speech	Updates sensory/communication preferences	
Parent/Carer	Reports interests from home	