



LANGUAGE SHIFT MINI- GUIDE

Moving From Compliance to
Collaboration in Parent Coaching





Introduction

Language is one of the most powerful tools we have as behavior analysts — not just for shaping client behavior, but for shaping motivation. The way we speak to parents can either increase their sense of ownership and confidence or unintentionally create pressure, resistance, or self-doubt.

This guide is built on the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) — a research-based framework for understanding human motivation. SDT proposes that people are most motivated and engaged when three core psychological needs are met:

1. **Autonomy** — the need to feel choice and control over one's actions. » Parents thrive when they have a voice in the process, rather than being told what to do.
2. **Competence** — the need to feel capable and effective. » Parents gain confidence when they see progress and are recognized for effort, not perfection.
3. **Connection (Relatedness)** — the need to feel supported and understood. » Parents stay engaged when they feel their BCBA genuinely understands their challenges and celebrates their wins.

When our language supports these three needs, parent training shifts from “teaching skills” to coaching empowerment.

Small changes in how we communicate — the words, tone, and framing we use — can completely transform how parents experience ABA and how motivated they feel to stay consistent.

Before or during each parent session, review the guide and choose 1–2 shifts you'll intentionally practice. Over time, these small changes will transform how parents respond to feedback, goals, and coaching.



Language Shifts That Build Autonomy

Instead of saying...	Try saying...	Why it works
"You need to do this every day."	"Would it feel realistic to try this daily, or should we start smaller?"	Offers choice and supports self-direction.
"We have to follow the plan."	"Let's look at what parts of the plan fit best for your family right now."	Reinforces flexibility and shared control.
"If you don't reinforce it, it won't work."	"When you notice it working, that's your cue to keep going."	Emphasizes learning and natural consequences.
"This is what ABA recommends."	"Here's what I've seen help other families—how do you feel about trying it?"	Invites collaboration instead of authority.
"We're going to work on compliance."	"Let's practice following directions in a way that feels easier for both of you."	Reframes the goal in human, values-based terms.



Language Shifts That Build Competence

Instead of saying...	Try saying...	Why it works
"You're not doing it consistently."	"You've practiced this a few times—let's talk about what made those days work."	Focuses on success data instead of failure.
"Make sure you prompt the right way."	"You're already doing the first part well—let's build on that."	Reinforces progress and capability.
"You need to collect more data."	"Let's jot down what's working this week so we can celebrate your progress."	Shifts from obligation to motivation.
"That's not quite right."	"You're close—let's tweak one small part to make it easier."	Builds confidence through shaping language.
"We'll add another goal next week."	"Once this feels easy, we can talk about layering something new."	Honors the parent's readiness and pacing.



Language Shifts That Build Connection

Instead of saying...	Try saying...	Why it works
"We need to work on this behavior."	"Let's make this routine feel calmer for both of you."	Ties goals to emotional outcomes.
"He's making progress."	"You've helped him make so much progress."	Reinforces the parent's agency and partnership.
"That's great data."	"That's a beautiful moment—how did it feel when he did that?"	Links progress to meaning, not metrics.
"Try using a token board."	"You mentioned she loves stickers—what if we built something around that?"	Personalizes reinforcement to family values.
"Good job sticking to the plan."	"You showed up again today, even when it was hard—that's real progress."	Highlights perseverance and shared humanity.



Reflect After Parent Training

Did I offer at least one meaningful choice?

Did I highlight what's working instead of what's missing?

Did I connect the parent's actions back to their values or emotions?

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