



Parent Guide

Help Your Child Learn and Practice
Habit Reversal Training for Tics



MindWeal

Parent's Guide: Habit-Reversal Training for Tics — Helping Your Child

Introduction

Tics are sudden, repeated movements or sounds that a child may feel are difficult to control.

Motor tics may include:

- Eye blinking
- Facial movements
- Head or neck movements
- Shoulder shrugging
- Arm or hand movements
- Other repeated body movements

Vocal tics may include:

- Sniffing
- Throat clearing
- Grunting
- Humming
- Repeating other sounds or words

Some children notice an uncomfortable sensation or urge immediately before a tic. This is called a **premonitory urge**. The child may describe it as pressure, tightness, tingling, tension, itching, or a feeling that the movement or sound “needs to come out.” Performing the tic may briefly relieve this feeling.

Not every child notices a premonitory urge. Younger children may initially notice the tic only after it has occurred.

Tics are not intentional misbehavior, and children should not be punished, criticized, or embarrassed because of them. Habit-Reversal Training, or HRT, does not mean that tics are simply “bad habits” or that the child could stop them through willpower.

HRT is a behavioral treatment that teaches children to:

1. Become more aware of a selected tic and its early warning signs.
2. Recognize the urge or sensation that may occur before the tic.
3. Use a competing response that makes the tic more difficult to perform.

This guide will help you support your child in learning and practicing the basic steps of HRT.

For mild or nonimpairing tics, these strategies may be offered as optional tools when the child would like help managing a tic. The child should not be pressured to work on tics that are not causing distress or interference.

For clinically impairing tics, this guide may be used as a bridge while your child is waiting to see a therapist and as additional support during treatment. It does not replace therapist-directed Comprehensive Behavioral Intervention for Tics, or CBIT.

Before You Begin

Habit-Reversal Training works best when:

- Your child wants to participate.
- Your child can recognize the selected tic or begin learning to recognize it.
- Your child can practice a competing response.
- You can support practice without criticizing or repeatedly calling attention to the tic.
- Practice does not increase your child’s anxiety, shame, or frustration.

The goal is not to force your child to eliminate every tic.

The goal is to help your child develop greater awareness and learn practical strategies for managing a tic that is bothersome, painful, embarrassing, or interfering with daily life.

Begin with **one tic at a time**.

Step-by-Step Guide

Step 1: Choose One Tic to Work On

Children may have several motor or vocal tics. Trying to work on all of them at once can become confusing or overwhelming.

Start by selecting one tic that:

- Your child wants help managing.
- Is easy for your child to recognize.
- Is particularly bothersome.
- Causes discomfort, embarrassment, or interference.
- Occurs often enough that your child can practice the HRT skills.

Whenever possible, allow your child to help choose the tic.

Describe the Tic Clearly

Ask your child to describe exactly what happens when the tic occurs.

For example:

- “I blink my eyes several times.”
- “My head moves quickly to the side.”
- “My shoulder moves upward.”
- “I clear my throat.”
- “I make a humming sound.”

Be specific. Instead of writing “facial tic,” describe the actual movement, such as:

“My nose wrinkles and my upper lip moves upward.”

Target Tic

The tic I would like to work on is: _____

This tic bothers me because: _____

REMEMBER: The child—not only the parent—should have a reason for practicing HRT

Step 2: Increase Awareness of the Tic

Before your child can use a competing response, your child must become more aware of the selected tic and learn to recognize when it is beginning.

Awareness training should be supportive and brief. Do not spend the entire day watching for or counting every tic.

Observe During Brief Practice Periods

Choose a short, planned period when the tic commonly occurs. During that period, help your child notice:

- What the tic looks or sounds like
- What happens immediately before it
- Whether there is an urge or physical sensation
- What your child is doing at the time
- Where your child is
- Whether your child is tired, stressed, excited, anxious, frustrated, or bored

Observation should be neutral. Avoid saying:

- “Stop doing that.”
- “You’re ticcing again.”
- “Why can’t you control it?”
- “You weren’t doing that yesterday.”

Practice Recognizing the Tic

During a brief practice period, ask your child to quietly acknowledge the tic when it occurs.

Your child might say:

- “That was the tic.”
- “I noticed it.”
- “I felt it starting.”
- “I noticed the urge.”
- “I felt the tension before it happened.”

The goal is awareness—not criticism or immediate suppression.

Use Parent Cues Carefully

Some children find it helpful for a parent to discreetly signal when the selected tic occurs. Other children find this embarrassing or frustrating.

Only use a parent cue when:

- Your child agrees to it.
- You and your child choose the signal together.
- The signal is discreet and neutral.
- The cue does not create pressure or conflict.

Examples might include a quiet word, a gentle hand signal, or another private reminder.

The purpose of the cue is to support awareness, not to tell the child to “stop.”

Step 3: Recognize the Early Warning Sign or Urge

Many children experience a sensation immediately before a tic. This is called the premonitory urge.

Your child may describe it as:

- Pressure
- Tightness
- Tension
- Tingling
- Itching
- An uncomfortable feeling
- A sensation that something is incomplete
- A need to make a particular movement or sound

Ask your child:

- “What do you notice right before the tic?”
- “Where do you feel it in your body?”
- “Does the feeling build up?”
- “Does the feeling change after the tic?”
- “Can you notice the earliest sign that the tic is about to happen?”

Early Warning Sign

Before the tic, I sometimes notice: _____

I feel it in this part of my body: _____

The earliest sign that the tic may be starting is: _____

REMEMBER: Not every child will recognize a premonitory urge immediately. Some children first learn to recognize the tic itself and develop awareness of the urge with additional practice.

Do not make your child feel unsuccessful if the urge is difficult to identify.

Step 4: Choose a Competing Response

A competing response is a voluntary movement, posture, or breathing pattern that makes the selected tic difficult or impossible to perform at the same time.

The competing response should:

- Be physically incompatible with the tic.
- Be safe and comfortable.
- Be reasonably discreet.
- Be socially acceptable.
- Allow the child to continue normal activities whenever possible.
- Be something the child can maintain for approximately one minute.
- Not cause pain, muscle strain, breath-holding, or physical discomfort.

The competing response should not be another tic.

Examples

The correct competing response depends on the exact tic. The following are examples only and may not be appropriate for every child:

For a head- or neck-jerking tic:

The child might look straight ahead with the chin slightly lowered while gently stabilizing the head and neck.

For a shoulder-raising tic:

The child might gently lower and relax the shoulders while keeping the arms comfortably at the sides.

For an arm or hand tic:

The child might place the hands flat on the thighs or gently hold the hands together in a comfortable position.

For a vocal tic:

Slow, controlled diaphragmatic breathing may be used in a way that is incompatible with producing the sound.

A competing response should never be forced. Stop using it if it causes pain, breathing difficulty, excessive tension, dizziness, or significant discomfort.

For complex motor or vocal tics, a therapist trained in CBIT or tic-focused HRT should help identify and refine the competing response.

Competing-Response Checklist

My selected tic is: _____

My competing response is: _____

This response makes the tic difficult because: _____

Before using the response, confirm:

- It is physically incompatible with the tic.
- It is safe.
- It is comfortable.
- It is reasonably discreet.
- My child can continue breathing normally.
- My child can maintain it for approximately one minute.
- My child is willing to practice it.

Step 5: Practice the Competing Response

The competing response becomes more useful when your child practices it before trying to use it in difficult real-life situations.

Planned Practice

During brief practice periods:

1. Ask your child to describe the selected tic.
2. Ask your child to describe the earliest warning sign or urge.
3. Have your child demonstrate the competing response.
4. Make sure the response is comfortable and correctly performed.
5. Have your child maintain the response for approximately one minute.
6. Allow your child to relax.
7. Repeat the practice briefly as tolerated.

Practice should not become exhausting or turn into constant tic monitoring.

Using the Competing Response in Daily Life

Encourage your child to begin the competing response when:

- The premonitory urge is noticed.
- An early warning sign is noticed.
- The child realizes the tic is beginning.
- The selected tic has just occurred.

The child should maintain the competing response for approximately one minute or until the urge has decreased.

The response is different from simply “holding in” or forcibly suppressing the tic. The child is intentionally using another safe behavior to respond to the urge and interrupt the usual tic pattern.

When the Tic Happens Anyway

The tic may still occur. This does not mean that your child failed.

Respond calmly:

“You noticed it. Let’s practice the response again when you’re ready.”

Do not criticize, take away rewards, or insist that your child should have stopped the tic.

Recognizing the tic after it occurs is still part of developing awareness.

Step 6: Practice in Different Situations

A skill learned during a quiet practice period may be more difficult to use during school, homework, sports, social activities, or stressful situations.

Once your child understands the competing response, gradually practice using it in different settings.

Begin with easier situations and then move to more challenging ones.

Examples may include:

- Sitting quietly at home
- Watching television
- Completing homework
- Riding in the car
- Talking with family
- Being in a public setting
- Attending school
- Participating in an activity that commonly increases the tic

The goal is for your child to use the skill without needing to stop normal activities whenever possible.

Identify Situations That Worsen the Tic

Tics may fluctuate with:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Excitement
- Frustration
- Fatigue
- Boredom

- Changes in routine
- Social attention
- Conflict
- Certain environments or activities

Stress does not mean that the tic disorder is psychological or that your child is causing the tic. Stress and other situations may simply increase tic frequency or intensity.

Trigger and Situation Tracker

The tic is more noticeable when: _____

The tic is less noticeable when: _____

One change that may make the situation easier is: _____

Helpful changes might include:

- Providing a brief break
- Reducing criticism or attention directed toward the tic
- Improving sleep routines
- Preparing the child for transitions
- Allowing an appropriate private place to release tics when needed
- Addressing anxiety or other sources of distress
- Practicing the competing response before a predictable trigger

Step 7: Use Relaxation and Stress-Management Strategies

Relaxation is not a replacement for the awareness and competing-response components of HRT. However, relaxation strategies may help when stress, anxiety, frustration, or physiological arousal increases the tics.

MindWeal offers separate DIY guides for:

- Deep Breathing Exercises
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Guided Imagery

Your child may use these strategies. The goal of relaxation is to help your child manage stress and physical tension. It should not be presented as something that is guaranteed to eliminate the underlying tic disorder.

Step 8: Support and Encourage Your Child

Parents play an important role in HRT, but support should not become pressure.

Praise Skill Use, Not the Absence of Tics

Praise your child for:

- Participating in practice
- Accurately identifying the tic
- Recognizing an early warning sign
- Attempting the competing response
- Using the response independently
- Discussing triggers honestly
- Continuing to practice after a difficult day

Examples include:

- “You noticed the urge early. That was excellent awareness.”
- “I saw you remember your competing response.”
- “You worked hard on that skill.”
- “Thank you for telling me what made it difficult.”
- “It’s okay that the tic happened. You’re still learning.”

Do not reward the child merely for being tic-free. That may unintentionally communicate that the tic is voluntary or that the child has failed when tics occur.

Optional Practice Chart

Your child may earn a point or star for:

- Completing a planned practice
- Identifying the selected tic
- Recognizing an urge or warning sign
- Attempting the competing response
- Using a relaxation strategy
- Reviewing progress with a parent

Do not remove points because a tic occurs.

Step 9: Track Progress Without Obsessive Counting

Tics naturally wax and wane. They may improve for several days and then temporarily increase again.

For this reason, progress should not be judged solely by counting every tic.

Consider tracking:

- How bothersome the tic feels
- How strong the urge feels
- How often your child remembers the competing response
- How independently your child uses the skill
- Whether the tic causes less pain or embarrassment
- Whether the tic interferes less with daily activities
- Whether your child feels more confident managing it

Weekly Progress Review

Once a week, ask:

- What worked well?
- When was the tic most difficult?
- Could you recognize the urge?
- Was the competing response comfortable?
- Did it make the tic more difficult to perform?

- Did the urge decrease?
- Did any situation make the tic worse?
- What should we practice next week?

Avoid reviewing progress immediately after every tic.

Step 10: Evaluate and Adjust

The first competing response may not always be the best one.

A different response may be needed when:

- It does not prevent the tic.
- It is uncomfortable.
- It causes muscle tension or pain.
- It is difficult to maintain.
- It interferes with normal activities.
- It is too noticeable in public.
- Your child does not want to use it.
- It works in practice but not in daily life.

Work with your child to identify what is not working.

Possible adjustments include:

- Beginning the response earlier
- Practicing awareness more carefully
- Choosing a more comfortable response
- Making the response more discreet
- Practicing in easier settings first
- Changing how parents provide reminders
- Addressing stressors that worsen the tic
- Obtaining help from a CBIT-trained therapist

Once your child has learned to manage one tic, the same process may be used for another bothersome tic.

Continue working with one tic at a time.

Tips for Success

- **Let your child choose to participate:** HRT works best when the child is interested and willing. Forcing practice may increase distress, resistance, or attention to the tics.
- **Focus on one tic at a time:** Begin with one clearly identified tic that your child wants help managing rather than trying to address every motor and vocal tic at once.
- **Keep practice brief and consistent:** Short, regular practice sessions are usually more effective than long or exhausting sessions.
- **Do not criticize or punish:** Tics are not intentional misbehavior. Avoid punishment, teasing, embarrassment, or repeated demands to “stop.”
- **Avoid constant monitoring:** Do not watch for tics throughout the entire day. Use brief practice periods and discreet reminders that your child has agreed to.
- **Praise effort and skill use:** Recognize your child for participating, noticing the tic or urge, practicing, and using the competing response—not for being tic-free.
- **Expect fluctuations:** Tics naturally wax and wane. They may temporarily increase with stress, fatigue, excitement, illness, or changes in routine. This does not necessarily mean HRT is not working.
- **Maintain normal activities:** Encourage continued participation in school, family activities, hobbies, and social experiences. HRT should improve confidence and functioning, not make the child feel responsible for controlling tics all day.
- **Address emotional needs:** Provide a safe space for your child to discuss embarrassment, frustration, anxiety, bullying, social difficulties, pain, or concerns about how others respond to the tics.

