

Porchlight

Autism Education Series

Prompting

What is Prompting?

Prompting is a way of helping a learner acquire or improve a certain skill. Behaviorists define it as “instructions, gestures, demonstrations, touches, or other things that we arrange or do to increase the likelihood that children will make correct responses.” In other words, prompts are cues that you provide a child to help them respond correctly. People with autism often do not understand the context in which to apply a newly learned skill, and may not be able to learn merely by imitating a person. Prompting is an effective way to teach specific skills to children with autism because it helps them progress without getting frustrated about learning something new. Prompting can be used with children and adults of any age, although it may be most effective with children over three.

Different Types of Prompts

There are a number of different prompts that you can use with your child. You can vary the type of prompts you use based on the skill you are trying to teach, and also based on your child’s comfort level with different prompts. The different types of prompts are:

- 1) **Gestural prompts** are prompts which use an action that a learner can watch the teacher do, such as pointing, touching, nodding.
- 2) **Verbal prompts** are prompts which use words to teach the learner something.
- 3) **Physical prompts** are ones where the teacher guides the learner by physically assisting them as they acquire a new skill.
- 4) **Visual prompts** are prompts that the learner can see that teach a particular skill, such as a picture, a drawing or a video etc.
- 5) **Model prompts** are ones where the teacher models the skill for the child.
- 6) **Positional prompting** is done by putting the correct response closest to the child.

How to Prompt

If you’d like to use prompting to teach a new skill, there are a number of things to consider. Before you begin, set up the tools you’ll need. As an example, to teach a child to brush his teeth set up a tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush, and a cup of water. Also, think of a reinforcer that the child might like to receive at the end, when he has successfully brushed his teeth. If the child loves stickers, have a sticker ready for immediate reinforcement. It might also be helpful to think of an appropriate time and a

cue that will remind him that he needs to brush his teeth. Break the task down into small components. Ask the child to pick up the tooth brush, put toothpaste on it, brush his teeth and rinse his mouth. For the most complex part of the task, which is brushing, use physical prompts to teach. For other parts, use verbal or gestural prompts.

Using Prompting Effectively

You can work with your child’s therapist to map out which skills might need you to use prompts. Your therapist can also give you more information about how to use prompts effectively. In general, you can keep the following tips in mind:

- 1) **Use minimal prompts:** When teaching a child to master different skills, use the minimum number of prompts and the least confining prompts are far as possible. For example, don’t pick up a pen and put it in a child’s hand if you want them to write something. Gesturing or using a verbal prompt should be sufficient.
- 2) **Set up your environment in advance:** To avoid a delay between a prompt and an action, set up in advance so that you have everything you need to teach the skill to a child. That means, thinking of a reinforcer and having that ready as well so that you can reward the child immediately.
- 3) **Use targeted language:** Your verbal prompts should be very concise and precise. Do not keep talking as a child learns the skills, instead focus only on the least number of words you need to use to prompt them.
- 4) **Think about your learner:** Are they comfortable with physical touch? If so, you can use physical prompts appropriately. If not, then you make need to use verbal, gestural or visual prompts more frequently. Consider what motivates them and what you could use to reinforce their learning.
- 5) **Fade prompts out as soon as possible.** Once a child has learned a skill, reduce the prompts until they are gone. This will prevent a child from becoming overly dependent on the prompts.

Conclusion

We hope this introduction to prompting is helpful. You can get additional tips and techniques from your child’s therapist and they can customize various techniques to your child’s needs.