

Using Prompts in ABA

What is a Prompt in ABA?

Children with autism often struggle to learn things from natural opportunities in their environment. Therefore, their teachers arrange the environment to create as many learning opportunities as possible.

During these opportunities, teachers use additional stimuli or emphasize certain dimensions of the requirements to increase the rate of correct responses. These modifications or additional stimuli brought in to help the child respond correctly are called prompts. A prompt is an additional stimulus that elicits the correct response.

In ABA, the term "prompt" refers to providing assistance or cues to encourage someone to exhibit a specific behavior. Similarly, a prompt is a type of aid or clue that can help us perform a certain behavior if we set a personal goal in our daily lives.

When used correctly, prompts contribute to increasing the chances of a behavior occurring, reducing frustration from failure, effort, and helping learners perform more efficiently.

Prompting is the process by which a person is assisted in displaying an ability until they reach the point of doing it independently. The ultimate goal is to become fluent and perform without any assistance, even in the natural contexts where that behavior is needed.

Examples:

- If a child doesn't tidy up their toys when asked, an adult can use indicative prompts to help them do it, showing them where to put the toy. Over time, the adult will reduce these assists until the instruction alone successfully evokes the child's response, and no further help is needed. The child tidies up their toys on their own when asked.
- If one of us needs to print something on a printer and doesn't know how, a colleague might tell them which buttons to press, and as a result, they'll be able to print. Over time, they'll learn to use the printer independently.
- If a child doesn't know what the letter "A" is and can't distinguish it from the letters "B" and "C," a parent can make "A" more special, for example, by drawing a bee next to it, while "B" and "C" remain plain. The child will distinguish the letter because it is uniquely marked. Over time, the bee disappears from next to "A." "A," "B," and "C" will look the same, yet the child will be able to identify "A."

In the category of prompts, any form of support that someone finds effective and useful in eliciting the response can be included. Each of us may respond to different types of prompts,

and it's essential to strategically choose the type of prompt that seems suitable for a particular task.

Equally important, however, is to analyze in the moment whether practice shows that other prompts might be more efficient and lead us more quickly to results, as well as the joy and ease of learning something new.

Types of Prompts

There are several types of prompts we can provide, but all fall into one of the two main categories:

A. Response Prompts

B. Stimulus Prompts

Response Prompts assume that another person's behavior elicits the correct response. Response prompts are concrete actions taken by someone else to elicit a response in the learner. They indicate how we suggest the expected response to a child with autism in a given context.

How many types of response prompts are there?

A.1. Verbal: These are instructions used to help the person provide the correct response.

Examples:

- Goal: The child is at tennis practice and needs to respond with a forehand.

Verbal prompt: The coach explains to the student how to position their body to hit a forehand.

- Goal: The child is in kindergarten and needs to copy the teacher's movements when she makes a paper boat.

Verbal prompt: Additional explanations (fold the paper in half, fold the top corners, fold the bottom, etc.).

- Goal: We want to make guacamole.

Verbal prompt: The spouse helps with instructions from the sidelines (mash the avocado, cut the tomatoes separately the size of your small fingernail, do the same for the peppers, add salt, pepper, lime, mix, taste, etc.).

Any verbalization can be a verbal prompt if it increases the chances of a correct response at a specific moment. Verbal prompts can include instructions, rules, clues, questions, or any other form of verbal assistance.

They can be effective because people have a history of being rewarded for following instructions and, as a result, develop a generalized repertoire of compliance with instructions.

Therefore, for them to be effective, the child needs to have the ability to understand the messages with which we assist them.

A.2. Gesture Prompts

Any movement or gesture made by a person that leads to a correct response in the presence of a discriminative stimulus.

Examples:

-Objective: The child needs to jump a certain way.

Gesture Prompt: The coach raises and lowers their hand to emphasize when it's time to jump and take the final step on the ground.

-Objective: We need to exit an unfamiliar building.

Gesture Prompt: An adult points in the direction of the exit.

-Objective: Respond to the instruction "Come" when called.

Gesture Prompt: Adding a hand motion.

Gesture prompts can only be effective if the person has a history of reinforcement for responding to gestures and understands their meaning. Gesture prompts exert stimulus control over behaviors indicated by gestures. Therefore, the child needs to interpret the meaning of gestures.

A.3. Modeling Prompts

Any demonstration of the correct response by another person that leads to the correct response can be considered a modeling prompt.

Examples:

• Objective: The child is at a tennis lesson and needs to respond with a forehand.

Modeling Prompt: The coach shows how to make the movement.

• Objective: The child needs to brush their teeth.

Modeling Prompt: An adult brushes their teeth alongside the child, demonstrating the correct movements.

• Objective: I want to do a pull-up.

Modeling Prompt: The coach demonstrates the pull-up.

Modeling prompts can only be effective if the learner can reproduce the given model. They work because the child already has a history of reinforcement for imitative behaviors, developing a generalized repertoire of imitation.

A.4. Physical Prompts

The person providing the prompt performs all parts of the expected response along with the learner. It usually involves hand-over-hand prompting.

Examples:

• Objective: The child is at a tennis lesson and needs to respond with a forehand.

Physical Prompt: The coach guides the child's hand in making the movement.

• Objective: The child needs to brush their teeth.

Physical Prompt: An adult physically guides the child's hand while brushing.

• Objective: I want to do a pull-up.

Physical Prompt: The coach physically lifts the learner.

All four types of prompts involve the behavior of another person attempting to influence the learner's behavior. They are more intrusive by definition but are often necessary in teaching. The most intrusive among all is the physical prompt, followed by the modeling prompt, the gesture prompt, and the verbal prompt.

B. Prompts on Stimuli. Prompts on stimuli involve changing some aspect of the materials or adding/removing another stimulus to evoke the correct response.

B.1. Within-Stimulus Prompts

B.2. Extra-Stimulus Prompts

Stimulus prompts mean modifying the configuration/aspects of the context across learning trials to help the child respond correctly. The environment or work materials are altered to be suggestive for the child.

A stimulus prompt may involve a change in the working materials. It sheds light, if you will, for the child on what to pay attention to in the context to find the key to the solution.

When we only modify aspects/configuration of the context/ relevant antecedent stimuli, without adding anything extra, we have a within-stimulus prompt. When we add an extra stimulus to the context, we have an extra-stimulus prompt.

B.1. Within-Stimulus Prompts

We can modify the context of learning in various ways.

- Its dimension
- Its size
- Its color
- Its shape
- The speed at which it is presented
- The distance

Examples:

- Goal: The child is at a tennis training and needs to respond with a forehand.
Prompt - Modifying the context: The ball comes with a slower speed, the ball comes from a greater distance.
- Goal: The child needs to cut along the line with scissors.
Prompt - Modifying the context: Small scissors with a stopper, thin paper, thick line.
- Goal: The adult must avoid eating sweets.
Prompt - Modifying the context: There are no sweets in the refrigerator or in the house.

B.2. Extra-Stimulus Prompts

Sometimes, a stimulus prompt involves adding another stimulus to what we have to help the child identify/discriminate the correct response.

Examples:

- Goal: Assembling IKEA wardrobe

Extra prompt: A schematic construction diagram.

- Goal: The child discriminates left from right.

Extra prompt: X drawn on the back of the right hand. Over time, gradually erased the X, and the children continued to respond well.

- Goal: Taking the phone home from work.

Extra prompt: Yellow case.

Studies have shown that procedures for using and fading prompts on stimuli are more effective and efficient than those on responses. Regarding the choice of a method for fading response prompts, there are no definite conclusions about choosing one procedure over another.

More studies are allocated to comparing types of response prompt fading than studies intending to compare stimulus prompts. This happens because, on the one hand, there are many more methods of using response prompts compared to the two types of stimulus prompts. On the other hand, response prompts are easier to use because stimulus prompts require extra effort from the adult for material preparation. They are also the most commonly used by practitioners.

Other observations that may encourage a good learning environment:

- Use as many examples as possible in teaching, as diverse as possible.
- Directly base teaching on conditioned discrimination targeting, not just simple discrimination.
- Differential reinforcement seems to matter in the efficiency of learning.
- Acceptance of prompts: This can be a goal in itself for some children and needs to be defined very specifically. Children tend to have a harder time accepting physical or echoic prompts than gestural or modeling prompts.
- Ensure that before starting teaching or using prompts, you have built a relationship with the child.
- Timely prompts tend to be considered rewarding by children. Prompt help given at the right time when children try to respond but don't know how. Example: closing the zipper on a jacket.
- Forced prompts are not prompts.
- The best prompts or situations that encourage children to accept prompts are those in which they have clearly signaled a willingness to collaborate, to respond.
- When working on accepting prompts, reinforce approximations in responses, even if they are not perfect, but the child has accepted your help. The target here is accepting assistance, not the perfect response.
- If physical prompts are not tolerated, use physical touch in association with reinforcers. Lift them to reach their favorite book on the shelf, sing and dance together to their favorite song, introduce a short physical game before offering another reward.

- If echoic prompts are not accepted, provide prompts when they initiate and need it: requests, make funny sounds that they could copy, associate funny sounds with enjoyable activities.

As a method for prompt withdrawal, we recommend **Flexible Prompt Fading (FPF)**, a prompting system similar to MTL (Most-to-Least) because both aim to reduce the prompt level from more intrusive to more discreet. However, they differ for several reasons:

- Firstly, there is no fixed criterion regarding when or after how many trials, the fading process begins.
- The criterion for fading in FPF relies on the judgment of the adult: Is the child ready to receive less assistance? The adult must keep the child's responses always at high levels (80% or above) or provide many prompts if the child does not understand what is asked. The child must maintain a high success rate (80% or above).
- There is significant flexibility in how assistance can be withdrawn. The intensity of the same prompt, the number of prompts, or the type of prompt can decrease.
- The adult decides when and how many trials to conduct to assess how the child responds when no assistance is provided, no matter how minimal.
- The prompt can be delivered concurrently with the SD (discriminative stimulus), before the SD, immediately after the SD at 1-2 seconds, or with a slight delay (2-4 seconds).
- The adult can use a wide range of different prompts (physical, gestural, visual, positional, field reduction). The instructor needs to provide as much support as necessary to lead the child to success but no more support than necessary.
- If the initially chosen prompt did not work, it was increased in the next trial.
- If the child, even in the case of an error, demonstrated understanding and motivation, they were given another chance without prompting. Otherwise, if it seemed that the child did not understand, they were promptly assisted in the next trial.
- After using a prompt, the adult quickly attempted to decrease it in the next trial or eliminate it.
- If the child was in the early stages of learning or if the adult considered the task still too challenging, then more trials with prompts were offered before starting to withdraw the prompt.
- The gradual withdrawal of prompts, trial after trial, allowed the participant to demonstrate what they had learned from the previous trial.
- Additionally, the adult decided in the moment how many stimuli to leave and when to introduce opportunities to respond to already mastered knowledge along with the targets.

Analysis in the moment involves asking yourself a series of questions throughout the session to decide how to proceed. Changes can occur from one moment to another. What are the questions that can guide you in your decisions when it comes to prompting? Here they are:

1. What behaviors interfere with the child's responses? Are there distractions that disrupt the quality of responses?
2. Are there prerequisites that are not present and prevent the child from responding correctly?

3. How is his current state? Is he calm or agitated? Is he engaged with you? Is he actively involved?
4. Have you ensured that you have his attention before giving instructions?
5. Is he motivated to participate in learning? Is there a reward involved?
6. What does his non-verbal behavior indicate? What function does his verbal behavior serve? What is he trying to communicate?
7. How were his recent responses? What have you learned from them?
8. What is his history of responding to that objective?
9. How difficult is the task? Is it a new task for the child?
10. What training do you have regarding the use of prompts?