Tips for Home or School
Using The System of Least to Most Prompts
By: C. J. Fields

What is a response prompt?

A response prompt is a teacher/parent behavior targeted at eliciting a child to present correct responding in a method appropriate to that child's communication capabilities. Response prompts are used to increase the probability of correct responding from the child.

What is a prompting hierarchy?

Response prompts exist on a continuum referred to as a prompting hierarchy. The prompting hierarchy is defined by the amount of assistance/intrusion that each prompt requires from the teacher for the child to present a correct response.

What does a prompting hierarchy look like?

Below is an example of a typical response prompting hierarchy:

- *Independent* – the child is able to perform the task on his/her own with no prompts or assistance
- *Gesture* – indicate with a motion what you want the child to do (e.g., pointing)
- *Indirect (Verbal or Nonverbal)* – tell the child that something is expected, but not exactly what (e.g., "Now what?" "What's next?", etc.) or use body language (e.g., expectant facial expression, questioning hand motion with a shrug, etc.)
- *Direct Verbal* – tell the child what he/she is expected to do or say (e.g., "Turn your power chair right.")
- *Modeling* – show the child what you want him/her to do
- *Partial Physical Assistance* – provide minimal supported guidance
- *Full Physical Assistance* – provide hand-under-hand guidance to help the student complete the desired task

What is the system of least to most prompts?

The system of least prompts, also referred to as least intrusive prompts and increasing assistance, is a prompting strategy where the teacher/parent progresses through a prompting hierarchy (like the one shown above) from the assumed least intrusive prompt to the most intrusive prompt necessary to obtain a correct response from the child. When a teacher/parent is utilizing the system of least to most prompts when providing a learning opportunity for a child, it is important to always begin by allowing the child an opportunity to respond correctly to the natural cue or question posed without any prompt being given (i.e., a chance for the child to respond independently). It is also important that the last prompt in the prompting hierarchy ensures that the child responds correctly. This is known as the controlling prompt, and effectively allows the child to successfully and correctly respond during each learning opportunity. This is important in building the child's understanding of what type of correct response is expected, and in providing consistent opportunities for success regardless of the child's abilities. All correct responses should be accompanied by positive reinforcement that is meaningful to the child. If a child responds incorrectly at any point in the prompting hierarchy the parent/teacher will immediately move to the next prompt in the prompting hierarchy. The ultimate goal of the system of least prompts is for the child to provide a correct response before a prompt is given.

When are prompts used and how are they faded?

Prompts are only used as a support mechanism for students when necessary, and only for as long as is necessary. At whatever the least intrusive prompt level a child responds correctly, that is where the trial for that specific learning task ends. Therefore, the prompts in the system of least to most prompts are self-fading, meaning that as a child begins to learn to how to perform a skill correctly at prompting levels of decreased intrusiveness, then the more intrusive prompts that were previously used are no longer necessary.

How not to use response prompting

A prompting hierarchy is not meant to be used in a way that produces prompt dependency in the child. Prompts are also not used to fill in quiet space while a child is processing/responding.

Example of a least to most prompting hierarchy:

Activity: Using a spoon to eat

Prompt hierarchy: Independent
Gesture
Indirect Verbal
Direct Verbal
Model
Partial Physical Assistance
Full-Physical Assistance

Time Interval Between Prompts: 3 Seconds

Reinforcer: Verbal descriptive praise (e.g., "Great job picking up the spoon!")

Independent
1. Place food item and spoon in front of child and wait 3 seconds to see if the child responds independently

Gesture
2. If the child does not respond in 3 seconds, direct the child to the spoon by pointing (gesturing) to the spoon

Indirect Verbal
3. If the child does not respond in 3 seconds, ask the child, "What do you do with the spoon," or "How do you eat your…" (The indirect verbal prompt can be paired with the gesture prompt)

Direct Verbal
4. If the child does not respond in 3 seconds, tell the child to "Use your spoon to eat your…" (The direct verbal prompt can be paired with the gesture prompt)

Model
5. If the child does not respond in 3 seconds, pick up the spoon and model scooping the food item and taking it to your mouth. (The model prompt can be paired with the direct verbal prompt)

Partial Physical Assistance
6. If the child does not respond in 3 seconds, use physical assistance to help guide the child's hand to the spoon but do not use full physical assistance to help the child complete the task of using the spoon to eat the food item. (The partial physical assistance prompt can be paired with the direct verbal prompt)

Full Physical Assistance (*Controlling Prompt*)
7. If the child does not respond in 3 seconds, use full physical assistance (hand over hand guidance) to fully assist the child in grasping the spoon, scooping the food, and bringing the food to the child's mouth (The full physical assistance prompt can be paired with the direct verbal prompt)

References & Sources:

Wolery, M., Ault, M. J., & Doyle, P. M. (1992). Teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities: Use of response prompting strategies. New York: Longman.

The Bridge School (June 8, 2009). Prompt Hierarchy. Retrieved February 23, 2013, from http://www.bridgeschool.org/transition/strategies_success/prompt_hier.php