

Spotlight: Prompting

Our **Spotlight** segments are for parents seeking additional information on subject matter relevant to helping a child make progress on communication, social, and coping skills. Here we focus on prompting, which is a very important component of the learning process for many kids with autism.

The big ideas:

- Prompting is not only for structured, formalized intervention. It is also an in-the-moment teaching tool for parents during daily life activities and routines.
- *Parents: consult with your child's team on how to prompt your child.* The type and intensity level that is right for a child depends on many factors. Also, some interventions such as ABA and PECS have very specific prompting methodology.
- Reinforcement plays a very big role in the prompting process. If you feel unclear on how to reinforce your child, talk to your child's team.
- We are huge fans of what we call a **thinking prompt**. This indirect form of prompting nudges a child to think through how to say or do something, or to problem-solve.
- If your prompting is not working, troubleshoot with your child's team. It may be your approach needs adjusting, or your child requires more intensive or additional direct instruction.
- When done improperly or over-used, prompting can actually interfere with learning or cause some kids to be much less independent. Please do not feel intimidated by this! We firmly believe parents can learn how to prompt their children.

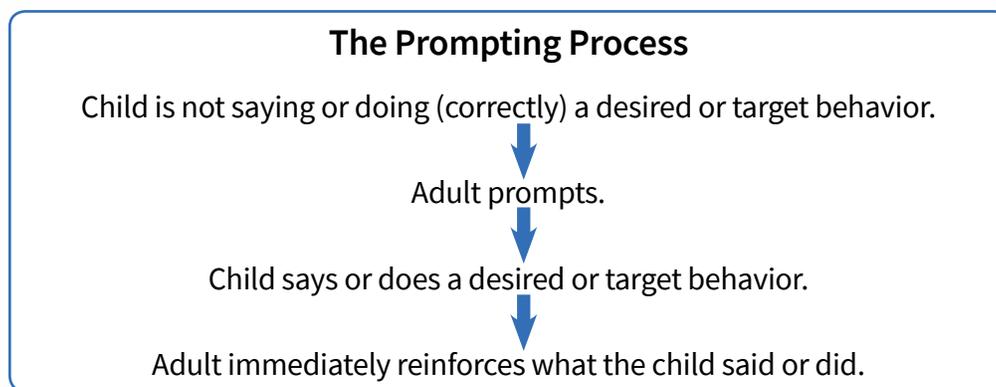
Yes, prompting is a useful teaching tool. However, we believe parents and other adults should **not** always prompt kids with autism. Great learning can take place when kids are given time and space to problem-solve and even to make mistakes. Sometimes the best in-the-moment teaching is when parents “sit on their hands” and keep quiet!

Prompting during in-the-moment teaching.

Prompting is when a parent takes action because a child is not saying or doing something. An example is when a child does not sit down when told to “*sit down.*” The parent then prompts the child to sit down.

Also, prompting takes place when a child says or does something incorrectly. An example is when a child sees a cat and says, “*Dog.*” The parent then prompts the child to say “*Cat.*”

The diagram that follows is for those who like a visual explanation, but please realize this is not a technical prompting protocol for ABA or another structured intervention.



In reality the prompting process does not always play out exactly this way or goes this smoothly. Discuss situations where things did not go well with your child's team.

What is a target? A target is a behavior or skill that a child does not currently do (or does not do consistently), but can learn to do with some form of teaching and practice. Structured behavioral intervention plans typically list specific targets. We use “target” in a more informal sense. Each of our prompting examples later specifically identifies a target, meaning the behavior or skill that the parent wants the child to learn to say or do.

The great thing about in-the-moment teaching is that it takes place during daily routines and unstructured time. As teachable opportunities come up, parents can use prompting and reinforcement to help kids learn or get better at all kinds of behaviors and skills.

Not sure what *in-the-moment teaching* means? Check out our other *Tips & Topics* for explanation and lots of examples.

Prompting Do's for in-the-moment teaching:

- ✓ To ensure your expectations/targets are realistic, consult with your child's team. Ask them if there are any behaviors or skills in particular you should focus on at home.
- ✓ Wait before you prompt to give a child some time to process and follow through, or to struggle a bit with something that's difficult. Adults are susceptible to jumping in too fast with a prompt.
- ✓ Deliver your prompt once then wait to see how your child does; adults can be guilty of repeating the prompt over and over (especially verbal prompts).
- ✓ As your child is learning a behavior or skill, try to be consistent with your prompting. If you only prompt sometimes when it comes to that target, your child might not make progress as quickly.
- ✓ As you prompt, please avoid saying things like, “No,” or “That’s wrong.”
- ✓ See if you can get away with a less intense prompt. You can always step up to a more intense prompt if needed.
- ✓ Reinforce positive behavior that results from prompting (our prompting examples include the parent reinforcing). Additionally, reinforce other, unprompted positive behavior; e.g., effort, paying attention, staying positive, making a spontaneous communication, eye contact, etc.
- ✓ Try not to be so focused on correctness or perfection that you lose sight of your child's successes. You'll find examples of this later.
- ✓ As your child gets better at a desired behavior, fade out (reduce) your prompting intensity and frequency. The hope is that eventually you will no longer need to prompt (with maybe a refresher prompt here and there).
- ✓ Be patient and keep at it as learning can take time and lots of practice in “real world” situations.

The best way to avoid prompting pitfalls such as unreasonable expectations, over-prompting, and ineffective prompting, is to have thoughtful, ongoing discussion with your child's team.

Examples of a parent prompting during in-the-moment teaching.

Verbal Prompts

For this type of prompt, a parent says whatever it is she/he wants the child to say. A verbal prompt can range from a full prompt where a parent says every word of the target, to a partial prompt such as the first sound of a word.

We focus here on verbal prompting used to help a child say something. Ask your child's autism professionals about verbal prompting for nonverbal behaviors as some interventions are very specific on when and how to use it.

Verbal Prompt

Mom points to a kid riding his bike and asks Anthony, “*What is the boy doing?*” (target for Anthony = he answers, “*Riding a bike.*”) Anthony does not answer. After a pause, Mom prompts by saying, “*Riding a bike.*” Anthony then says, “*Riding bike.*” Mom immediately responds, “*Yes! The boy is riding a bike! Good job telling me the boy is riding a bike!*” Mom then *high 5’s* Anthony.

→ Mom waited for what she felt was a reasonable amount of time to see if Anthony would on his own answer the question. Eventually you should develop a sense of what is a reasonable amount of time to wait before prompting your child.

Mom's reaction to Anthony is an example of a parent not being overly focused on correctness or perfection. After being prompted to say “*Riding a bike,*” Anthony said, “*Riding bike.*” He dropped the a. Mom made a judgment call and reinforced what Anthony said even though it was not perfect. (Had the target been for Anthony to use the correct indefinite article (a), then perhaps she would have prompted him to say the *a*.) Your child's Speech & Language Pathologist (SLP) can help you with language/communication targets and judgment calls.

Verbal Prompts - continued

Partial Verbal Prompt - Adult says only the beginning of a sentence or phrase, or the first sound of a word.

Dad points to the moon in the photo and asks Mason, “*What is that?*” (target for Mason = he says, “*Moon.*”) Mason says, “*Star.*” Dad prompts, “*M...*” Mason then says, “*Moon.*” Dad immediately responds, “*Mason says ‘moon’! Yay, that is a moon!*” Dad then gives Mason’s arm a gentle squeeze (Mason likes that).

→ Dad did not say, “*No,*” or “*That’s wrong.*” Additionally, he said nothing about the incorrect response of “*star.*”

Tip: Some quick, immediate repetition can help a child learn to say or do something. In this example, Dad could repeat the question once or twice more (prompting as needed and immediately reinforcing). However, don’t over-do the repetition as you might lose your child’s attention and enjoyment. In-the-moment teaching is supposed to be light and brief.

Physical Prompts

In order to do a physical prompt, a parent in some way touches, holds, or physically guides a child to help her/him do something (correctly). A physical prompt can range from a full physical prompt; e.g., hand-over-hand to guide a child to spread peanut butter on bread, to a partial physical prompt where the level of physical contact is less; e.g., a very light touch to a child's back to get a child to move.

Physical Prompt - Adult physically guides child

Mom and Kaylee are at the kitchen table. Mom playfully says, “*Touch Mom’s nose.*” (target for Kaylee = Kaylee responds by touching the Mom’s nose) Kaylee touches Mom's chin. Mom prompts by gently holding and guiding Kaylee’s finger to touch Mom’s nose. As soon as Kaylee’s finger is touching the Mom’s nose, Mom says, “*Yay! Kaylee is touching Mom’s nose!*” Then Mom taps Kaylee's nose lightly while saying, “*Beep beep! I just touched Kaylee's nose!*” Kaylee laughs.

→ Mom did not say anything when Kaylee touched the wrong body part. Instead, she quietly did a physical prompt. Notice how she used humor to make her in-the-moment teaching light and fun.

Partial Physical Prompt - A less involved form of physical guidance, like light touch or pressure

Dad reads aloud from Talking about Thinking, “*If you know how to play putt putt, raise your hand.*” (target = Isaac will raise his hand) Isaac does nothing so Dad prompts by applying a brief, light, upward pressure on Isaac’s arm. Isaac raises his hand. Dad reacts, “*Isaac is raising his hand! Isaac knows how to play putt putt! Good job raising your hand!*” Dad gives Isaac a quick hug. Dad then raises his hand and says, “*I know how to play putt putt, too!*”

→ A full physical prompt is often not needed, or only needed when a child is first learning something. You should eventually develop a sense of how much of a prompt is needed, if not your team can guide you.

We hope our examples adequately illustrate that we do not consider in-the-moment teaching to be super serious and intense. Instead, we encourage interactions to be brief, light, and when possible playful -- even when a parent needs to prompt.

Gestural Prompts

A gestural prompt is when a parent uses some kind of silent motion such as pointing. Facial expressions made by a parent can be a form of gestural prompt as well. Think of a time when you were younger when a silent frown from your parent caused you to stop horsing around. That frown was an effective prompt!

If you can get away with it, use a gestural prompt instead of a physical prompt because a gestural prompt is a less-involved form of prompting. For example, in the putt putt example on the preceding page, Mom could have prompted Isaac by making a slight upward motion of her own hand.

Gestural Prompt - Adult makes some kind of gesture

Mom points to the bubble bath in the photo and says, “*Look at that!*” (target = James responds by looking at the bubble bath) James does not look at the bubble bath. Mom prompts by wiggling her index finger close to James's face. When he looks at her finger, she then moves it to touch the bubbles. James's gaze follows Mom's finger so that he is now looking at the bubble bath. Mom immediately says, “*James is looking at the bubble bath! Wow, so many bubbles!*” Mom then tickles James.

→ Mom knows James will like all those bubbles in the tub, and therefore he'll be naturally reinforced by looking at them. Mom purposely picked something of interest to work on this target.

In all our examples of physical and gestural prompting, the parent stays silent while prompting. This is in keeping with the idea of *less is best* in prompting. The less an adult says or does to help a child to do/learn something, the more a child has to think and be independent.

Want information on reinforcement? Check out our *Tips & Topics, Spotlight: Reinforcement*.

Visual Prompts

The parent prompts using some kind of visual with images, symbols, and/or icons.

Dad is doing an activity with Mia where they take turns picking an item from a box. Dad says, “Dad’s turn,” but Mia is eager and leans forward to pick. (target = Mia will wait her turn) Dad prompts by silently showing Mia a red stop sign card. Mia has been taught this card means ***wait your turn***. Mia looks at the card, sits back, and waits for Dad to take his turn. Dad immediately says, “Way to go waiting! Mia is waiting her turn!” He also gives her a quick belly blow, a silly sound on her belly with his mouth.

→ Ask for copies of visual prompts that your child's team uses in school or therapy so you can use them at home.

Text Prompts

For children who can read, the parent uses a visual with text.

At lunch Dad asks Noah, “What is Ava doing?” (target = Noah answers, “She is eating.”) Noah mixes his pronouns and answers, “He is eating.” Dad points to a printed card with this wording: ***girl = she***. Noah then says, “She is eating.” Dad responds, “Yes, she is eating. Ava is a girl. Ava is a she. Good job saying ‘she’!” Dad then stands up and does a quick silly dance. Noah laughs.

→ Often adults will use a verbal prompt when a child mixes pronouns. However, for kids who struggle with pronouns, some visual teaching and visual/text prompting might be very helpful.

Mealtimes are a great opportunity for visually-based in-the-moment teaching. Keep visuals handy and use them as opportunities come up.

Thinking Prompts

We love thinking prompts! This is because this type of prompting is as much about encouraging **active thinking** as it is helping a child to do or say something. (Some teachers use the term *prompt* or *thinking prompt* as a kick-off for a writing activity. We are not talking about that here.)

Thinking Prompt – Adult asks a question or comments to nudge a child to think through a problem

Dad notices Quinn’s shoelaces are untied and says, “*I see your shoe is untied. Tie your shoe, then we can go to the playground.*” (target = Quinn will tie his shoe laces) Quinn struggles with the laces. Dad has options for how to deal with this situation. One possibility is a physical prompt of hand-over-hand guidance. Another option would be for Dad to model or demonstrate. Yet another one is a verbal prompt, “*Say, ‘Help please!’*” (For some kids, learning how to ask for help is an important coping target.) And yet another would be to do nothing at all until Quinn has success or asks for help.

Dad opts for a thinking prompt. He knows that Quinn has had success in school tying his shoes while singing a song he was taught. Dad asks as a thinking prompt, “*Hey, isn't there a song about tying shoes?*” Quinn thinks a bit then starts singing the song. By singing the song, Quinn figures out how to tie his shoelaces. Dad immediately says, “*Way to go, you tied your shoelaces all by yourself! It was hard to do it, but you stuck with it! High 5!*”

→ Quinn’s persistence was naturally or inherently reinforced by his success. But if Quinn had not been successful, Dad could have intervened with help while praising Quinn for trying hard. Also, had Quinn not been successful, Dad could let the school team know he needs more direct instruction on shoe-tying.

The above example illustrates how during in-the-moment teaching -- unless someone is following a specific intervention plan -- there are options when it comes to what desired behavior to focus on as well as how to prompt. Because this is true for many situations, try not to get too stressed out over your target and prompting choices. Of course it will help you to discuss real situations with your child's team for their guidance.

Thinking Prompts - continued

Thinking Prompt – Adult asks a question or comments to nudge a child to think about what to say

Gabrielle and another little girl, Emmie, are drawing with markers. It is obvious to Mom that Gabrielle wants a turn with Emmie's red marker. (Target = Gabrielle asks for a turn with the marker) One option would be for Mom to give Gabrielle a verbal prompt, “*Gabrielle say, ‘Can I have a turn with the red marker?’*” However, Mom and Gabrielle recently read together *Talking about Thinking*. So Mom opts for a thinking prompt and says to Gabrielle, “*Gabrielle, I wonder if Emmie knows what you are thinking?*” Gabrielle then says to Emmie, “*I want red marker, please.*” Emmie hands over the marker. Mom immediately reinforces both girls, saying, “*Wow, you girls are doing such a good job taking turns. Gabrielle, good job using a nice tone of voice and saying ‘please.’ You said what you were thinking! Emmie, you let Gabrielle have a turn. I say you each get a cookie for doing such a good job with turn-taking!*”

→ Mom's reaction to Gabrielle is another example of a parent not being overly focused on correctness or perfection. Even though Gabrielle did not word her request as a question (which was the target), Mom made a judgment call to reinforce what Gabrielle actually said because she did a good job using a nice tone of voice and saying *please*. Note that while Mom gave them each a cookie for positive turn-taking behavior, Gabrielle was naturally or inherently reinforced by getting the marker when she requested it.

If your child does/says something really positive, take the time to reinforce what the child did/said that was positive. You can always revisit the original target. And keep in mind that for certain targets -- like making a request in the form of a question -- a child like Gabrielle might need direct instruction/intervention by a professional, such as the school SLP.

Final thoughts on parents prompting.

Parents are not, nor should they be actual therapists, even when they get trained to do some form of structured intervention at home or they learn certain techniques for use during unstructured time. There are times when a parent could teach a child, but instead is simply a parent.

That said, kids with autism often do not learn in the same way as “typical” kids. Kids with autism *can learn and make progress*, but they need more: more clear and direct instruction, visual supports in certain cases, and lots of real life practice opportunities, that yes, include prompting. While we are asking more of parents of kids with autism, we believe the effort is worth it.

Tip: If possible, have someone discreetly videotape you doing in-the-moment teaching at home with your child, such as during mealtime. Have your child’s professionals review the video to give you feedback and suggestions on prompting, reinforcement, etc.

