

Spotlight: Prompting

This **Spotlight** is not about prompting in a therapeutic setting. Nor is it about a specific prompting protocol. It's about how parents -- during everyday "real life" situations -- can somehow intervene (prompt) to help a child learn or get better at saying or doing something.

The big ideas:

- Prompting is an in-the-moment teaching tool parents can use to help their kids learn and generalize skills and behaviors.
- Consult with your child's team on reasonable expectations and 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 Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Picture Exchange Communication System (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 the **thinking prompt** where the parent makes an indirect comment or asks an open-ended question to nudge a child to think through how to say or do something.
- If your prompting is not working, troubleshoot with your child's team. It may be your child requires more intensive or additional direct instruction, or your approach needs adjusting.
- When done improperly or over-used, prompting can interfere with learning or cause some kids to be less independent. Please do not feel intimidated by this! We firmly believe parents can learn not only how to prompt, but when to do it.

Yes, prompting is a useful teaching tool. However, we believe parents and other adults should not constantly prompt kids with autism. Great learning can take place when kids are given time and space to try something on their own, self-correct, problem-solve, and even to make mistakes. Just because you can prompt, does not mean you always should prompt! Sometimes, the best in-the-moment teaching is when parents "sit on their hands" and keep quiet!

Prompting during everyday life to foster learning.

The following examples are of a parent turning an informal interaction into a teaching opportunity that includes prompting. In each scenario, the child needs a prompt in order to say or do something.

Maya is in the process of learning to say “yes.” Mom holds a drink just out of Maya’s reach and asks, “*Maya, want juice?*” Maya reaches for the juice while making a grunting sound. Keeping the juice away, Mom prompts, “*Say, ‘yes,’*” and Maya says, “*Yes.*” Mom immediately hands over the drink and says, “*Okay! Here’s your drink! High 5, Maya, for saying ‘yes’!*”

→ A parent can do so much to build expressive communication skills when a child is motivated; i.e., they want something. While it’s tempting to give a child what they want to keep them happy or content, try -- as much as possible -- to turn situations like this into communication opportunities.

Jackson is learning joint attention skills, such as looking when someone says, “*Look!*” Dad sees that Max (the family cat) has just rolled over onto his back. Jackson is nearby pushing a toy car back and forth. Dad says, “*Jackson, look!*” Jackson does not look but continues to push his car. Dad repeats, “*Look!*” and prompts by lightly pressing Jackson’s cheek to move his gaze so he can see Max. As Jackson is looking Dad says, “*Great job looking at Max!*” Jackson laughs and says, “*Max silly!*” Dad immediately responds, “*Yes, Max is so silly! Max is lying on his back!*”

→ Important: as we discuss later, there are different ways to prompt. In this example, the parent uses a gentle physical prompt, but please do not assume we recommend this type of prompting for your child, or in all situations. **Additionally, we do not believe in forcing an autistic child to look at something or to make eye contact.**

→ Dad knew that Jackson would love seeing Max lying on his back. Use your knowledge of your child’s likes and interests to take advantage of situations, just as Dad did with Max the cat.

Be sure to ask yourself, “Does my child truly need a prompt right now?” You should only prompt when it is necessary for a child to say or do something.

Prompting during everyday life to foster learning (continued).

Sometimes, the purpose of prompting is to correct what a child has said or done.

In school, Emma is learning mealtime vocabulary and social skills, including passing things when someone asks. Mom, Dad, and Emma are eating dinner. Dad says to Emma, “*Emma, can you give me a fork, please?*” (By the way, Dad could have reached the fork, but is taking advantage of an in-the-moment teaching opportunity.) Emma hands Dad a spoon. Dad silently sets down the spoon and points to the fork as a prompt. Emma picks up the fork and hands it to Dad. Dad immediately says, “*Thanks for the fork!*” Dad then tickles Emma (she likes that). He points to the spoon, “*That’s a spoon. Can you please give me a spoon?*”

→ We recognize that you are so busy that you might use your child’s mealtime as a chance to look at your phone or do some dishes. However, mealtime is such a great opportunity for in-the-moment teaching and positive connection, please try at least to sit with your child for a bit each day.

→ Note how in both examples on this page, the parent does not say, “No,” or “That’s wrong.”

Riley has a hard time with the pronouns *my* and *your* -- he gets confused when other people use them, and he mixes them when speaking. Dad and Riley are waiting for a bus. To have a little fun and to work on *my* and *your*, Dad starts a game of *Simon Says*. Dad says, “*Simon Says, ‘Touch your nose.’*” Riley mixes the pronoun and touches Dad’s nose. Dad prompts by quietly and gently guiding Riley’s finger to touch Riley’s nose and says, “*Simon Says, ‘Touch your nose.’ Riley, you are touching your nose! Good job touching your nose!*” Dad then jokingly taps Riley’s nose and says, “*Beep-beep! Papa is beeping your nose!*” Riley and Dad share a laugh, then Dad continues the game.

→ This is a great example of in-the-moment teaching by a parent. First, through a fun, low-key game, Dad creates a teaching situation and an opportunity to enjoy a positive connection with his child. Next, he very casually corrects and prompts Riley to help Riley learn. Dad could have been looking at his cell phone while they waited for the bus. But by choosing to take even a few minutes to do in-the-moment teaching, Dad is truly making a difference.

It’s going to happen: sometimes your prompt does not work. By talking to your child’s team about how to handle these situations, you will set yourself and your child up for success.

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

- ✓ Get guidance from your child's team on how and what to prompt. You want to ensure you are prompting in a productive way and that your expectations are realistic.
- ✓ When you prompt to correct a child, avoid saying things like, "No," or "That's wrong."
- ✓ Wait before you prompt. Adults are susceptible to jumping in too fast with a prompt. Give a child time: to process a verbal direction or a task; and to struggle with something that's difficult.
- ✓ Deliver your prompt once then wait to see how your child does. Adults are often 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, your child might not make progress as quickly, or maybe not at all.
- ✓ See if you can get away with a less intense/less direct prompt. You can always step up to a more intense/more direct prompt if needed.
- ✓ Reinforce positive behavior that results from prompting (our prompting examples include the parent reinforcing). Additionally, reinforce other 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.

Types or Category of Prompt

The main types/categories of prompting are:

- Verbal
- Physical
- Gestural
- Visual
- Thinking

The following pages have examples for each type of prompt. Please realize that the examples are just that: examples. They are not hard and fast recommendations of how you should prompt your child.

For each example, we describe 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. The target in each example is what the parent wants the child to say or do.

While you might not have a formal plan that includes targets for your child, we hope that you put some advance thought into what are reasonable expectations for your child. In other words, any time you prompt, be sure the prompted behavior or skill is within your child’s ability level.

Tip: When it comes to targets think: “baby steps.” Begin with something that is easily achievable. As your child experiences success, slowly increase the level of difficulty. This reduces frustration and makes the learning process more relaxed and enjoyable for both of you.

Are you feeling overwhelmed or intimidated right now? Or like we expect you to be your child’s therapist and not just a loving parent? That is not our intention: we view in-the-moment teaching as something very different than therapy or formal intervention. (If you haven’t yet, take a look at our *Tips & Topics* content about in-the-moment teaching.)

We are hopeful that you will come to realize that plugging in here and there brief, low-key instances of in-the-moment teaching (including prompting) will not be too burdensome. Many of these interactions can even be enjoyable and an opportunity to share a positive connection with your child.

Verbal Prompts

For this type of prompt, a parent says whatever it is they want the child to say. A verbal prompt can range from a full prompt where a parent says the target in its entirety, 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 prompt verbally.

Full Verbal Prompt

Mom is putting away groceries. Anthony sees she has grapes and screams, "I want grapes!"

Target: Anthony asks for the grapes using a friendly tone of voice and the word *please*.

Ignoring Anthony's demand, Mom prompts in a friendly tone of voice, "Can I have grapes, please?" Anthony then says in a friendly tone of voice, "Can I have grapes, please?" Mom immediately gives him grapes and responds, "Yes, here are some grapes. Anthony, you asked so nicely. Good job asking with a friendly tone of voice. Good job saying 'please!'" Mom then hugs Anthony. (Anthony likes to be hugged.)

→ Mom did some great in-the-moment teaching. First, she ignored Anthony screaming a demand. Ignoring unproductive behavior is an excellent parent strategy, when feasible! Next, she prompted for positive, target behavior. Additionally, she reinforced by immediately giving Anthony grapes, praising him, and giving him a hug. Note that Mom was specific. Rather than only saying, "Good job," be specific with your praise so your child knows what exactly they did that resulted in your praise.

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

Many autistic kids struggle with communicating wants and needs in a productive way. If your kiddo could use some extra help when it comes to using a friendly tone of voice and *please*, check out [Talking about Thinking](#). It includes a mini lesson on how to "be green" (friendly) when saying what we want.

Verbal Prompts - continued

A partial verbal prompt is less intense than a full one. It's for situations where a child is getting fairly consistent with saying or doing something, but might need a slight reminder.

Partial Verbal Prompt

Dad points to the moon in a photo and asks Mason, "What is that?"

Target: Mason replies, "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." He said nothing about the incorrect response and instead gave a partial verbal prompt of the correct response.

Tip: Some immediate repetition can help a child learn more quickly. 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. If your child likes humor, you could do the repetition in a joking way with lots of smiles; e.g., pretending you can't hear your child's answer.

Careful! While asking a child questions is a type of in-the-moment teaching, avoid over-asking, or asking a question that is too difficult. There are many reasons for this, but here are two biggies: 1. Some autistic kids will get into the habit of only communicating in response to a question; 2. Peppering a kid with a lot of questions can make an interaction unpleasant, stressful, or simply not fun for the child.

Physical Prompts

In order to do a physical prompt, a parent in some way touches, holds, or physically guides a child. 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

Mom and Kaylee are at the kitchen table. Mom playfully says, "Touch Mommy's chin."

Target: Kaylee touches Mom's chin.

Kaylee touches Mom's cheek. Mom prompts by gently holding and guiding Kaylee's finger to touch Mom's chin. As soon as Kaylee's finger is touching Mom's chin, Mom says, "Yay! Kaylee is touching Mommy's chin!" Then Mom playfully touches Kaylee's chin while saying, "Boop, Mommy is touching Kaylee's chin." Kaylee laughs. Mom then touches Kaylee's cheek while saying, "Boop, now Mommy is touching Kaylee's cheek!" Mom alternates between Kaylee's chin and cheek saying, "Boop, chin! Boop, cheek! Boop, chin! Boop, cheek!" Kaylee loves this.

→ 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 help Kaylee learn the difference between *chin* and *cheek*.

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 in a given situation. If not, your team can guide you.

Physical Prompts - continued

Partial Physical Prompt

Dad reads a direction out loud from Thinking about Thinking, *“If you like chocolate cake, raise your hand.”*

Target: Isaac raises his hand.

Isaac does nothing so Dad prompts by quickly and lightly touching Isaac’s forearm. Isaac raises his hand. Dad immediately reacts, *“Isaac is raising his hand! Isaac likes chocolate cake! Way to go, raising your hand!”* Dad gives Isaac a high 5. Dad then raises his hand and says, *“I’m raising my hand because I like chocolate cake, too!”*

→ We hope our examples adequately illustrate that in-the-moment teaching is not meant to be super serious and intense. Parents, keep your teaching interactions brief, light, and when possible, playful -- even when you need to prompt.

Dad could have prompted by **modeling** by immediately raising his own hand after reading out loud the direction. Modeling can be an excellent form of teaching and prompting. If your child does not respond to the modeling, you can try a partial or full physical prompt.

Gestural Prompts

A gestural prompt is when a parent uses some kind of silent motion such as pointing. Additionally, facial expressions are a form of gestural prompting. Think of a time when you were younger when a silent frown from an adult caused you to stop doing something. That frown was an effective gestural prompt!

If you can get away with it, use a gestural prompt instead of a physical prompt. This is because a gestural prompt is a less intense form of prompting. Think about the example on the preceding page. As a gestural prompt, Dad could have silently pointed to Isaac's hand.

Gestural Prompt

Mom and James are looking at [Talking about Thinking](#). Mom points to the bubble bath in the photo and says, "Look at that!"

Target: Following Mom's point, James looks at the bubble bath in the photo.

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 knew James would like all those bubbles in the tub, and therefore he would be naturally reinforced by looking at them. Mom purposely picked something of interest to work on this target. You can do the same: by taking advantage of situations where your child will be engaged or motivated, you help your child have success.

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. **Try to avoid constantly telling your child what to say or do!**

Visual Prompts

For this type of prompt, the parent in some way shows the child a visual with images, symbols, and/or icons. As with all prompting, the goal is to fade out a visual as the child makes progress. You can always go back to the visual as needed.

Visual Prompt

Mom is doing an activity with Mia where they take turns picking an item from a box. Mom says, “Mom’s turn,” but Mia is eager and leans forward to pick.

Target: Mia waits her turn.

Mom prompts by silently holding up a red stop sign card. Mia has been taught that this card means ***wait your turn***. Mia looks at the stop sign, sits back, and waits for Mom to take her turn. Mom immediately says, “Way to go waiting! Mia is waiting her turn!” She also gives Mia a quick tickle.

→ 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 prompts by showing the child a visual with text.

Text Prompt

Dad, Noah, and Ava are sitting at the table eating lunch. Dad asks Noah, “What is Ava doing?”

Target: Noah answers, “She is eating.”

Noah mixes his pronouns and answers, “He’s eating.” Dad prompts by silently pointing to a printed card: ***girl = she***. Noah looks at the card, then says, “She’s eating.” Dad responds, “Yes! She is eating. Ava is a girl. Ava is a she. Way to go saying ‘she!’” Dad then stands up and does a quick silly dance. Noah laughs.

→ For kids who struggle with pronouns, a combination of visual teaching and visual/text prompting can be very effective.

Does your child tend to mix the pronouns *she* and *he*? That is very common for autistic kids. [Guessing about Thinking](#) has a mini lesson and activities on these two pronouns.

Tip: Mealtime is a great opportunity for visually-based in-the-moment teaching. Keep visuals handy and use them as opportunities come up.

Thinking Prompts

If you have knowledge or expertise when it comes to prompting autistic kids, you are probably thinking right now, “*What? There’s no such thing as a thinking prompt!*”

So what are we talking about? *Thinking prompt* is our label for when a parent asks an open-ended question or makes an indirect comment to get a child to think. It’s great for situations where all a child needs is a little “nudge.” Check out the following scenarios to see what we mean. For each scenario we describe for comparison purposes both a direct prompt and a thinking prompt.

Thinking Prompt

Isaiah is at Grandma’s house with Mom and Grandma. Isaiah asks Mom, “*Does Grandma have candy?*”

Target: Isaiah asks his Grandma if she has candy.

How Mom could prompt directly: “*Ask Grandma, ‘Do you have candy?’*”

Mom opts to use a thinking prompt and says, “*Hmm, I don’t know. What can you do to find out?*”

Isaiah thinks then asks his Grandma, “*Do you have candy?*”

Grandma replies, “*It’s your lucky day, I’ve got some Hershey kisses. Would you like one?*”

Mom says, “*Good job thinking about how to find out if Grandma has candy! Good job asking Grandma! High 5!*”

→ With the thinking prompt Mom nudged Isaiah to figure out a solution on his own. If Isaiah had not figured out what to do, then Mom could have used the direct, verbal prompt.

→ Note how Mom praised Isaiah for thinking. She did this to help Isaiah understand the concept of thinking (a tricky concept for many autistic kids), and to reinforce Isaiah’s problem-solving efforts.

Autistic kids are at risk for becoming prompt dependent. A child who is very prompt dependent tends to wait passively for an adult to tell, show, or guide them on what to do. With a thinking prompt, an adult intervenes but in a way that requires a child to “do some work” for themselves.

Thinking Prompts - continued

Thinking Prompt

The school team has been helping Gabrielle build her turn-taking skills; she tends to grab what she wants without waiting or asking. She and another little girl, Emmie, are drawing with markers. It is obvious to Dad that Gabrielle wants a turn with Emmie's red marker.

Target: Gabrielle asks for a turn with the marker.

How Dad could prompt directly: *"Gabrielle say, 'Can I have a turn with the red marker?'"*

Dad opts to use a thinking prompt and says, *"I wonder if Emmie knows what you are thinking."*

(Dad and Gabrielle have been reading [Talking about Thinking](#) which teaches the importance of communicating wants/needs, thoughts, and feelings to others.)

Gabrielle then says to Emmie in a friendly tone of voice, *"I want red marker, please."* Emmie hands over the marker. Dad immediately reinforces both girls, saying, *"Gabrielle, good job using a friendly tone of voice and saying 'please.' You said what you were thinking! Emmie, you let Gabrielle have a turn with your marker. I'm giving both of you a cookie for taking turns!"*

→ Dad's reaction to Gabrielle is an example of a parent not being overly focused on correctness or perfection. Gabrielle did not word her request as a question, which was the target. Rather than correcting her, Dad made a judgment call to reinforce Gabrielle's tone of voice and saying *please*.

The thinking prompt in the above example would not work with a kid who does not understand the basic concepts about thinking. If your child would benefit from some clear, visual teaching on thinking and communicating thoughts and feelings to others, check out our [Thinking Series](#) products!

Thinking Prompts - continued

Thinking Prompt

In school, the occupational therapist (OT) taught Quinn a song about tying shoelaces that has really helped Quinn. 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."* Quinn has clearly forgotten the steps to tying shoelaces.

Target: Quinn ties his shoelaces.

How Dad could prompt directly: Dad uses a physical prompt of hand-over-hand guidance.

Dad opts for a thinking prompt. Dad asks, *"Hey, isn't there a song about tying shoes?"* Quinn thinks a bit then starts singing the song. By singing the song, Quinn is able to tie his shoelaces. Dad immediately says, *"Way to go, you tied your shoelaces all by yourself! It was hard, but you did it! High 5!"*

→ Notice how indirect Dad's prompt was. And yet it was effective because it got Quinn to tie his laces by himself.

→ Quinn's persistence was naturally or inherently reinforced by his success. But what if Quinn had tried but could not tie his shoelaces? Of course there are times when you will need to intervene with help. In situations like this, be sure to reinforce your child's effort!

Many skills or behaviors (like tying shoes or making a request in the form of a question) are very challenging. As a first step, your child might need significant direct instruction/intervention by a professional, such as the school OT or Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP). Once your child has made good progress, you can help your child improve or generalize the target behavior/skill through in-the-moment teaching. Always reinforce your child's effort and positive attitude regardless of success!

During in-the-moment teaching there are often options when it comes to what desired behavior to focus on, as well as how to prompt -- unless someone is following a specific intervention plan. In the above example, Dad had other prompting options, such as modeling. Or, he could have prompted Quinn to ask for help. In real life, you need to be flexible, depending on the situation. It will be helpful to discuss actual situations with your child's team for troubleshooting and guidance.

You do not always have to prompt. Learning can take place in many ways.

As we said before, just because you can jump in with a prompt, does not necessarily mean you should. Perhaps you let things play out so a child will experience the effects (positive or negative) of saying or doing something. Or, maybe you skip prompting to focus on other behavior you think is the greater priority. Here is an example of the latter.

Mom is working on her computer. Kalani walks up to Mom, holds out her tablet, and says, "I winning game!"

Instead of prompting to correct Kalani's grammar, Mom moves so they can both look at the tablet and responds, "*I see! You won the game, wow! Good for you! Look at your score!*" Mom and Kalani look at the tablet, while sharing some brief back-and-forth conversation about Kalani's win. Mom then does some informal teaching: "*Next time, Kalani can say, 'I won the game.' Can you say, 'I won the game!?'*" Kalani says, "*I won the game.*" Mom says, "*Hooray! Kalani won the game! Time for a quiet happy dance*" Mom does a quick, silent happy dance which Kalani loves.

→ For autistic kids who struggle with social and joint attention skills, it's very important for parents to reinforce when their autistic child makes an effort to be social or engage in joint attention. In this example, instead of immediately prompting to fix Kalani's grammatical error, Mom prioritized sharing in the pleasure of Kalani's win. She also tapped into an opportunity for some back-and-forth conversation. However, Mom eventually did some in-the-moment teaching to help Kalani learn the correct grammar.

Your child's SLP can help you with communication goals/targets (including for joint attention and grammar) as well as judgment calls on whether and how to prompt.

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, autistic kids often do not learn in the same way as “typical” kids. They *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 autistic kids, we believe their effort is worth it.

Tip: If possible, have someone discreetly videotape you doing in-the-moment teaching 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.

