A Complete Guide For Using Prompts

**What is a prompt?**

Prompts have been defined by world-renowned behaviorists: “Instructions, gestures, demonstrations, touches, or other things that we arrange or do to increase the likelihood that children will make correct responses.”

**Why use prompts?**

Prompts usually go hand-in-hand with errorless teaching. There are many benefits to this approach:

* The utilization of prompts is a positive way of teaching and therefore encourages learning because students continually make progress and aren’t thwarted or discouraged by hearing the word “no” time and time again.
* When the word “no” is overused, learners can easily become desensitized to it. Using an errorless approach, “no” is infrequently used and therefore still retains its meaning which is especially important in potentially dangerous situations like quickly stopping someone from touching a hot stove, running in front of a moving vehicle, etc.
* Because there are so many different types of prompts, there is a wide selection from which to choose to accommodate different learning styles and abilities. Learners who are excellent readers can benefit from written prompts; those who are visually impaired can be assisted with hand-over-hand prompts, etc.

9 Types of prompts

As mentioned, there is a wide range of prompts from which you as a teacher, parent or therapist can choose. You can base your selection on how much assistance your learner requires as well as by taking into consideration his unique learning style or challenges:

**1. Gestural prompt**

A Gestural Prompt  can include pointing, nodding or any other type of action the learner can watch his teacher do.  
**Example:**Teacher asks learner, “What is something you drink from?”  
Teacher prompts learner by pointing to a cup.

**2. Full physical prompt**

A physical prompt is where the teacher provides physical contact to guide the learner through the entire requested activity.  
**Example:**Teacher asks learner, “Clap your hands.”  
Teacher prompts learner by holding each of the learner’s hands in his and then moving the learners hands through the entire action of hand-clapping.

**3. Partial physical prompt**

The teacher provides some assistance to guide the learner through part of the requested activity.  
**Example:**Teacher asks learner, “Clap your hands.”  
Teacher prompts learner by gently touching each of the learner’s two hands and gently nudging the learner’s hands toward each other.

**4. Full verbal prompt**

The teacher provides the learner with a spoken, complete response to the question just asked.  
**Example:**Teacher asks learner, “What comes after Thursday?”  
Teacher prompts learner by stating “Friday.”

**5. Partial verbal prompt or phonemic prompt**

The teacher provides the learner with part of the response to the question asked or just says the first ‘phoneme’ or sound.  
**Example:**Teacher asks learner, “What comes after Thursday?”  
Teacher prompts learner by stating “Fr”

**6. Textual or written prompt**

This can be in the way of a list or some other type of written instruction.  
**Example:**Teacher asks learner, “Do your chores.”  
Teacher prompts learner by presenting him with a written checklist of his chores.

**7. Visual prompt**

A visual prompt can include a video, photograph or drawing on a medium like paper, a whiteboard, or  an electronic device.  
**Example:**Teacher asks learner, “Clap your hands.”  
Teacher prompts learner by playing a video of a person clapping his hands.

**8. Auditory prompt**

This can include any type of sound the learner can hear like an alarm or timer.  
**Example**: Teacher asks learner, “Clean up your toys in 5 minutes.”  
Teacher prompts learner by setting a timer to go off in 5 minutes.

**9. Positional prompt**

This type or prompt involves the teacher putting the correct response closest to the learner.  
**Example:** Teacher shows the learner three objects… a ball, a shoe and an apple and asks learner, “Point to the one that you eat.”  
Teacher places the apple closest to the learner.

PLUS – Wait prompts – wait 3 seconds before you provide a prompt especially on tasks that you know they are proficient with.

Important Prompting Tips

Always **use the least amount of prompting necessary** to get the job done. This is important in order to avoid having your learner become  “prompt-dependent,” meaning that he relies on prompts too much. When this happens, prompting becomes counterproductive as it diminishes a learner’s independence by making him only respond with the assistance of a prompt. For example, If you feel that he knows a word but just needs a bit of help, use a phonemic prompt instead of a full verbal prompt.

For this same reason of avoiding prompt dependency **use prompts that are the least intrusive** whenever possible. A gestural prompt, for example, is much less intrusive than a physical prompt so if you feel that a gestural prompt will do the trick, use it. Resort to the more instrusive prompts only when absolutely necessary.

Be sure to **fade prompts** as quickly as possible to try to reduce prompt-dependency. For example, if you make a request for your learner to clap his hands and need to follow it up with a full physical prompt, the next time you ask him to clap his hands, go with a partial physical prompt. Hopefully the time after, you’ll need no prompt at all. The situation will vary from learner to learner in terms of just how quickly you can fade your prompts but just keep in mind the basic rule that your goal should always to be reduce and ultimately eliminate the need for prompts.

**Use prompts** when your learner:

* is **about to respond with an incorrect response** (e.g. you see him reaching for the wrong object, start uttering the incorrect answer, etc.)
* responds with an **incorrect** response
* **doesn’t respond** at all (we usually give my son about 3 seconds to respond before intervening with a prompt)

**Vary** your **praise** and **rewards**:

* Give some praise and a smaller reward for a correct response that is achieved with a prompt
* Give a huge amount of praise and a much greater reward for a correct response that is achieved without a prompt

**Avoid saying “no.”**

* If your learner errs or makes a mistake, get in there with a prompt and assist him, and then repeat the request while fading your prompts as much as possible until they become unnecessary.
* Whenever possible, **try using mechanical prompts instead of human prompts**. Research has demonstrated that for individuals with Autism, mechanical prompts are easier to fade and are less likely to create prompt dependency than those that are delivered by a person. An example would be to choose an alarm instead of your own voice as a reminder to clean up.