

Module: Prompting

STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS: Graduated Guidance

The graduated guidance procedure is used only with chained skills (skills comprised of several behaviors sequenced together to form a more complex skill), and it almost always involves using physical prompts. With the graduated guidance procedure, team members apply the amount and types of prompts needed to help the learner with ASD complete the target skill/behavior, and they immediately fade (reduce) the amount and types of prompts needed as the learner begins to acquire the skill. This process requires many moment-to-moment decisions about when to apply and fade the prompts. Thus, it takes considerable skill to use graduated guidance, and failure to appropriately fade prompts can cause learners to become prompt dependent.

Preparing for the Intervention

Step 1. Selecting and Describing the Target Skill/Behavior

In Step 1, team members define the target behavior or skill that they want learners with ASD to acquire. The graduated guidance procedure should only be used with chained tasks (putting on a coat, setting a table, cleaning a bathroom, sorting and folding laundry).

1. Team members define the target skill/behavior in terms that are observable and measurable.

For example, “John will become independent in domestic living skills” is not an observable or measurable definition of a target skill/behavior. On the other hand, the definition, “John will set the table for four people, with each setting having a plate, glass, napkin, spoon, fork, and knife in its proper location” specifies the behaviors John will be taught. Such degree of specificity allows team members to observe the target skill/behavior directly and measure his progress.

2. Team members identify the target skill/behaviors of the chain by:
 - a. using a sequence of steps from research or a curriculum,
 - b. completing the chain and writing down the steps,
 - c. watching someone else do the chain while writing down the steps, and/or
 - d. logically analyzing what needs to be done to complete the skill and writing down the refined steps.

With chained tasks, team members identify (a) the number and sequence of steps in the chain, (b) whether to teach one step at a time, or (c) whether to teach all steps at the same time. In most cases, it makes sense to teach the chain in the sequence typically used by competent performers.

Step 2. Identifying the Target Stimulus

In Step 2, team members identify the target stimulus. The target stimulus is the event or thing that should cue the learner with ASD to begin the chain.

1. Team members identify one of the following as the target stimulus:

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- a. *a naturally occurring event*. Examples: Having dirty hands after finger painting is the target stimulus for hand washing; needing to use the bathroom is the target stimulus for asking to use the restroom or moving to the bathroom and using it.
- b. *completion of one event or activity*. Examples: Completing an instruction activity is the target stimulus for putting materials away, cleaning up the area, and moving to the next area for the next activity; finishing one job is the target stimulus for doing the next job (e.g., finishing stocking a shelf in the store is the target stimulus for taking the boxes to the trash).
- c. *an external signal*. Examples: A ringing bell may signal (a) it is time to go to the next class; (b) a work shift is completed in an employment situation; or (c) the clothing is dry and should be taken from the dryer, sorted, folded, and put away.

Sometimes the external event is something someone else does. For example, when the team member passes out a test, this may be the target stimulus for learners to write their names on the answer sheet; a peer greeting the learner with ASD is the stimulus for returning the greeting; or when someone asks a question, this is the target stimulus for answering.

Clearly specifying the target stimulus allows the team member to ensure learners are attending to the target stimulus before they start the chain. This will reduce dependence on team member instructions and team member prompts.

Step 3. Selecting the Cue or Task Direction

In Step 3, team members identify the event or object that will cue the learner to perform the target skill/behavior. A cue basically tells the learner that it is time to use the target skill/behavior. Cues and task directions are bridges used in instruction to help learners identify the target stimulus and then engage in the target response. For example, if a team member is teaching a boy to take off and hang up his coat when he enters the classroom, the target stimulus is going indoors (i.e., entering a room from outside cues most of us to take off and hang up our coat). However, during instruction, the team member would likely greet the child warmly, and then say, "Take off your coat and hang it up." This statement tells the boy that some behavior is expected before he starts his school day. The statement does not tell him how to do the skills, it just tells him that it is time to do them.

1. Team members select at least one of the following cues to begin the teaching exchange (trial):
 - a. *material or environmental manipulation*. Getting the materials set up and ready before the learner comes to the activity (e.g., setting up tasks for individual work time, setting the table before snack, placing playdough and toys on the table, arranging desks for small group work).

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- b. *task direction*. Telling the learner to get his coat on to go home, giving a picture card to go wash hands, presenting a flashcard with a sight word on it and asking, "What is this?"
- c. *naturally occurring event*. Ringing phone, fire alarm, school bus arriving after school.

Step 4. Selecting Reinforcers

Step 4 is focused on selecting reinforcers that are appropriate for individual learners with ASD, task demands, and target skill/behaviors. The goal of reinforcement is to increase the likelihood that learners with ASD will use the target skill/behavior again in the future. Therefore, selected reinforcers should be highly motivating.

1. When choosing reinforcers for learners with ASD, team members identify:
 - a. what has motivated learners in the past and
 - b. learners' deprivation state (i.e., What do they want that they can't easily get?)
2. Team members identify a reinforcer that is appropriate for the target skill/behavior and instructional task.

The reinforcer should be as natural as possible. That is, it should be related to the activity that is being implemented. For example, it would be natural for a learner with ASD to get free time or have access to a preferred activity/object after taking part in a challenging, non-preferred learning activity. Another example would be to use food as a reinforcer during food-related activities such as snack time or lunch when the target skill/behavior is requesting.

With chained skills and the graduated guidance procedure, the completion of the chain is ideally a reinforcer; however, for many learners this is not the case. Thus, additional reinforcers should be used at the end of the chain.

Examples of positive reinforcement include:

- preferred activity/favorite toy (e.g., special job, squishy ball, sand table)
- free time
- verbal praise
- food-related activity
- opportunities to be away from others
- objects used in stereotypic behavior
- preferred toys and games
- time with a preferred adult or peer

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Please refer to *Positive Reinforcement: Steps for Implementation* (National Professional Development Center on ASD, 2008) for more information about reinforcement.

Step 5. Identifying the Controlling Prompt

In Step 5, team members select a prompt that ensures that the learner with ASD performs the target skill/behavior correctly. This is called the controlling prompt. For some learners, the controlling prompt is as simple as pointing to the faucet to prompt hand washing, while others need full hand-over-hand assistance.

1. Team members try out different prompts to see which ones are successful in getting the learner with ASD to complete the task correctly.

With the graduated guidance procedure, the prompts are almost always physical, but with learners who have a lot of language skills, verbal prompts could be used. When selecting and using physical prompts, team members should be careful about how they use them prompts. Providing physical prompts from behind the individual often allows for more natural movements to be taught. Further, team members should be careful not to force or hurt the learner when physically prompting. When resistance occurs, just hold the hands in place rather than forcing movement. When resistance subsides, continue to prompt the movement. Be sure others (supervisors, assistants, coworkers) understand the purpose and nature of physical prompts so that you are not accused of physical abuse.

Step 6. Determining the Length of the Response Interval

With graduated guidance, a short response interval (a couple of seconds) often occurs after delivery of the target stimulus, attending cue, and task direction. Because chains are being taught, this short response interval is an opportunity for the learner to start the chain on his/her own.

1. When determining the length of the response interval, team members consider:
 - a. *learner characteristics*. Team members should consider factors such as how long it usually takes the learner to respond when the learner knows how to do the behavior. Adding a couple of seconds to this typical length of time is generally adequate for determining the length of the response interval.
 - b. *task characteristics*. Team members might consider how long it takes another learner with ASD to use a similar skill. For example, if it takes another learner 4 seconds to respond to a verbal prompt, the team member might try using 4 seconds as the response interval for this particular learner with ASD. Team members also should consider the amount of time a learner will be allowed to *begin* a task as well as how long the learner will have to *complete* the task. For example, a learner with ASD may begin writing his name within 4 seconds of the cue; however, it may take him 2 minutes to complete the task. In this case, setting the response interval at 6 seconds for the learner to start the task, and 2.5 minutes to complete it is reasonable.

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2. When selecting a response interval, team members time how long it takes the learner to complete similar skills/tasks.

This information gives team members a good starting point for the response interval.

Step 7. Specifying Prompt Fading Procedures

In this step, team members determine how to fade prompts as the learner with ASD becomes more proficient at doing the chained skill.

1. Team members select one of the following prompting strategies to fade prompts:
 - a. *decreasing the intensity of the prompt.* Intensity refers to the amount of force used when delivering the physical prompts. An example would be moving from complete hand-over-hand instruction to just having your hands on the learner while s/he does the chain.
 - b. *providing less assistance by changing the prompt type.* An example would be moving from a full physical prompt to a verbal prompt.
 - c. *immediately removing the prompt.*

Although team members make decisions about fading prompts within the context of ongoing routines and activities, they must specify clear strategies for prompt fading prior to implementation to decrease learner dependence on prompts to use the target skill/behavior correctly.

Step 8. Identifying Activities and Times for Teaching

Graduated guidance is used to teach chained skills. Examples include dressing and undressing, cleaning up work and play areas, feeding with a spoon, drinking from a cup, using a napkin, bathing, washing hands, combing hair, setting a table, washing dishes, making a snack, cooking, janitorial skills, and many others. Because the target stimulus (i.e., the need for the chain) should signal the time for using the skill, teaching should occur when the chain is needed.

1. Team members analyze the day and determine when and where the chain is needed.

Those times should be selected as the instructional times.

2. If few natural times to teach the chain are identified, team members build in times when the skill may be taught.

For example, if the skill being taught is taking off a coat, there may be limited times to practice this skill. In a classroom setting this may only occur when the child enters the classroom and

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comes in from the playground. Adding other times (e.g., wearing the coat to the gym or to the lunch room) is appropriate, because this would increase the teaching opportunities. In a home-based early intervention setting, additional opportunities could be created by having the learner go outside times to play for several short periods of time, check the mail, or go for a walk.