



Errorless Learning: Why We Help Children Get It Right While They're Learning

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Understanding how prompts can support successful learning without creating unnecessary dependence.

When we are teaching a child something new, we have to decide how much opportunity we are going to give them to make mistakes. Sometimes mistakes are a natural and useful part of learning. There are also situations where repeated errors can make teaching less efficient, particularly when the child is practicing a response they have not yet learned.

One approach we sometimes use in applied behavior analysis is called errorless learning. The basic idea is to arrange instruction so that the child is likely to respond correctly, especially during the early stages of teaching. We provide assistance when necessary and then gradually reduce that assistance as the child develops the skill [1][2].

The goal is not to prevent children from ever making mistakes. The goal is to help them learn efficiently while avoiding unnecessary frustration and repeated practice of incorrect responses.

Why Repeated Errors Can Be a Problem

Imagine that we are teaching a child to draw a plus sign. I say, “Do this,” and demonstrate the shape. The child picks up the marker and draws a circle.

If I simply repeat the instruction and the child draws another circle, we have not made much progress. The child is continuing to practice a response that does not match the learning target. Depending on the circumstances, repeated errors may also become frustrating or discouraging.

Instead, I might provide additional assistance before the child responds incorrectly again. I could demonstrate the movement more clearly, provide a visual guide, change the size of the model, or use another appropriate prompt. The idea is to increase the likelihood that the child experiences the correct response.

This does not mean that a wrong response is a problem the child has caused. It may tell us that the instruction was unclear, the task was too difficult, the materials were not accessible, or the child needs a different kind of support. Errorless teaching begins with arranging the situation so the child has a reasonable opportunity to succeed.

What Does Errorless Learning Look Like?

Suppose we are teaching a child to identify the number two. Initially, we might present the number two by itself and provide a clear model. Then we might ask the child to touch the number while providing enough assistance to help them respond correctly.

As the child becomes familiar with the target, we can introduce another number as a distractor. Now the child has to discriminate between the number two and another number. We may initially provide additional assistance, then gradually reduce it as the child becomes more accurate.

Eventually, we want the child to identify the number two independently, even when it is presented alongside several other numbers. The prompts are temporary supports that help the child develop the skill.

The same general idea can apply to many kinds of learning. We might give a clearer model when teaching a motor response, use a visual sequence when teaching a routine, or arrange the materials so the relevant choice is easier to understand. The support should fit the child, the task, and the teaching goal.

Errorless learning does not require every teaching situation to look the same. It is a way of thinking about how to prevent unnecessary practice of errors while helping the child contact the correct response.

Prompting Does Not Mean the Child Has Mastered the Skill

This is one of the most important things to understand about errorless learning. A child may respond correctly because we provided a prompt, but that does not mean the child could have responded correctly without it. We need to distinguish between teaching trials and demonstrations of independent performance.

For example, suppose a child completes seven opportunities to draw a plus sign. On three trials, the therapist provides physical assistance. On four trials, the child draws the shape independently.



If we are measuring independent responding, the child's score is four out of seven, or approximately 57 percent. The prompted responses may have been useful for teaching, but they do not demonstrate independence.

This is why accurate data collection matters. We need to know whether the child is becoming less dependent on prompts over time. A child may be responding correctly more often, but if the adult is still providing the same level of assistance, the data should show that distinction.

Prompted practice still matters. It can help the child contact the correct movement, response, or routine. It can also help us identify what kind of support is useful. We simply should not describe prompted performance as independent performance.

The Importance of Fading Assistance

One of the risks of prompting is that children can become dependent on it. If we always point to the correct answer before the child responds, the child may learn to wait for our gesture rather than attend to the actual instruction. That is not what we want.

Prompt fading means gradually reducing the amount of assistance we provide. We might move from a more obvious prompt to a less obvious one, increase the time allowed for independent responding, or change the materials so the natural cues become more important.

The specific procedure depends on the child and the skill. But the goal remains the same: we want the child to respond correctly without needing the adult's assistance.

Fading should be responsive rather than automatic. If we reduce support too quickly, the child may experience repeated failure. If we keep providing the same prompt after the child no longer needs it, we may limit opportunities for independence. Watching the child's performance helps us decide when to change the level of assistance.

It is also useful to look at whether the child is responding to the intended cue. If the child answers only after a particular gesture, phrase, or movement from the adult, we may need to fade that prompt so the child can respond to the natural instruction or materials.

Errorless Learning Is Not the Same as Forcing a Response

It is important to distinguish supportive prompting from physically forcing a child to complete an activity. Errorless learning should be designed around the child's needs, comfort, and willingness to participate. A child who is resisting physical guidance may need a different teaching arrangement or a less intrusive form of prompting.

We should also consider whether the task is appropriate and whether the child has the prerequisite skills necessary to succeed. Sometimes repeated errors indicate that the task is too difficult or that our instructional approach needs to change. Providing more intrusive prompts is not automatically the answer.

Good teaching involves selecting supports that help the child learn while respecting their autonomy and individual needs. A model, visual cue, environmental change, smaller step, or clearer instruction may be more helpful than physical guidance. We should consider the least intrusive support that gives the child a

meaningful opportunity to respond.

A child's communication about discomfort also matters. If the child says no, moves away, uses an AAC system, or otherwise indicates that something is wrong, we should consider what that communication may be telling us. The task may need to be adjusted, the child may need a break, or the teaching plan may need review.

The purpose of errorless learning is to support participation and learning. It is not to make a child's body complete a response at any cost.

When Should We Allow Errors?

Not every skill needs to be taught through errorless learning. Sometimes allowing a child to try, make a mistake, receive feedback, and try again is perfectly appropriate. Older students and children with stronger problem-solving skills may benefit from opportunities to discover and correct their own errors.

The decision depends on the learning target, the child's abilities, and how the child responds to mistakes. If errors are producing frustration or interfering with learning, a more supportive approach may be helpful. If the child is learning effectively through feedback and independent attempts, we may not need to prevent every mistake.

The cost of an error can also vary. A child learning to draw a shape may be able to try again without much difficulty. A child learning a safety routine may need more carefully arranged teaching so incorrect responses do not create unnecessary risk. The teaching approach should reflect the skill and the situation.

The goal is not to follow one teaching procedure regardless of the circumstances. It is to use the approach that helps the child learn most effectively.

Build Success Without Hiding the Real Skill

Errorless learning works best when the support moves the child toward the actual skill rather than creating a different response that only looks correct. We need to ask whether the child is learning to respond to the relevant instruction, material, or natural situation.

For example, if we are teaching a child to select a picture, a prompt that consistently draws attention to the correct picture may help at first. But we eventually need to know whether the child can select the picture when the prompt is gone and the choices are arranged in a new way.

This is one reason to vary examples and check performance under different conditions as the child becomes ready. We want the child to learn the concept or routine, not memorize one adult's particular movement or one fixed arrangement of materials.

Success should be meaningful. A child who completes a response with help has made progress in the teaching process. A child who completes it independently has demonstrated a different kind of progress. Both are worth noticing, and they should be described accurately.



The Goal Is Independence

When I think about errorless learning, I try to remember that prompting is a means to an end. We provide assistance because we want the child to learn something they cannot yet do independently. As the child develops the skill, that assistance should become less necessary.

The most important moment is not necessarily when the child completes the response with our help. It is when the child begins performing the skill without that help. That is when we can see that learning is taking place.

Errorless learning can be a valuable teaching strategy, but only when we remember what we are working toward. We are not trying to produce correct-looking responses with adult assistance forever.

We are trying to help children become capable, confident, and increasingly independent. That means arranging support carefully, fading it thoughtfully, respecting communication, and paying attention to what the child is actually learning.

References

- [1] Touchette, P. E., & Howard, J. S. (1984). Errorless learning: Reinforcement contingencies and stimulus control transfer in acquisition of simple discrimination tasks. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 42(3), 297–313. [<https://doi.org/10.1901/jeab.1984.42-297>] [2] MacDuff, G. S., Krantz, P. J., MacDuff, E. C., & McClannahan, L. E. (1993). Prompts and prompt-fading strategies for people with autism. In R. L. Koegel, L. K. Koegel, & G. Dunlap (Eds.), *Positive Behavioral Support*. [<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1993-98008-008>]
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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

Scope and safety

This article provides general educational information. It is not individualized medical, behavioral, mental-health, legal, or emergency advice. Individual support should consider the learner's communication, health, safety, disability-related needs, culture, and context.



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