



The Difference Between Helping a Child and Doing It for Them

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Understanding prompting, independence, and how to provide just enough assistance for children to succeed.

One of the most important decisions we make when teaching children is deciding how much help to give them. If we do not provide enough assistance, a child may struggle, make repeated mistakes, or become frustrated. If we provide too much assistance, the child may complete the activity without actually learning to do it independently.

This is something I talk about frequently when training therapists. We want children to be successful, and sometimes that means helping them perform a response correctly. But we also need to remember that the goal is not simply to get the task completed.

The goal is for the child to learn how to do it.

What Is a Prompt?

In applied behavior analysis, a prompt is assistance we provide to help someone perform a particular response. Prompts can take many forms, including verbal instructions, gestures, models, visual cues, and physical assistance. The type of prompt we use depends on the skill we are teaching and what the child needs.

For example, suppose we are teaching a child to draw a plus sign. I might say, “Do this,” while drawing a plus sign on my paper. If the child does not respond, I might point to the paper, demonstrate the response again, or provide additional assistance.

Sometimes a child needs very little help. Other times, particularly when learning a new motor skill, the child may need more substantial support. The important question is whether the assistance is appropriate for the child and the task.

A prompt is meant to support a response that the child is learning. It is not evidence that the child has already mastered the skill. That distinction becomes important when we decide what to teach next and how to measure progress.

Why We Sometimes Help Children Get It Right

Let’s imagine that I say, “Do this,” and demonstrate drawing a plus sign. The child picks up the marker and draws a circle instead. If I simply allow the child to repeat that incorrect response over and over, I may not be providing particularly effective instruction.

One approach we sometimes use is called errorless learning. The idea is to arrange instruction so that the child has a high likelihood of responding correctly, especially during the early stages of learning. Rather than waiting for repeated mistakes, we provide assistance when it is needed and gradually reduce that assistance as the child develops the skill.

For example, I might initially provide a model and additional visual support to help the child draw the plus sign. As the child becomes more successful, I reduce the assistance and allow more opportunities for independent responding. Eventually, I want to be able to give the instruction and have the child draw the plus sign without any additional help.

Helping a child respond correctly is not a problem. In many situations, it is good teaching. The problem comes when we confuse completing a response with learning to perform it independently.

A child who draws a plus sign with assistance has participated in the task. That response may have been a valuable teaching opportunity. It does not necessarily mean the child can draw a plus sign independently.

Correct Does Not Always Mean Independent

Suppose a child completes seven opportunities to draw a plus sign. On four of those opportunities, the child draws the shape independently. On the other three, the therapist provides physical assistance.

If we are measuring independent responding, the child’s score is four out of seven, or approximately 57 percent. Even though the child completed the shape on all seven opportunities, three of those responses



required help. We cannot count those as independent.

That does not mean the prompted responses were failures. They may have been valuable opportunities to practice the movement, contact the materials, and experience success. But the data need to distinguish between what the child can do independently and what the child can do with assistance.

This distinction matters outside therapy, too. A parent may say, “My child can get dressed,” but when we observe the routine, we discover that the adult is providing instructions for every step and physically helping with several of them. The child is participating in dressing, which is wonderful. Independent dressing is a different skill.

Being precise about this distinction helps us avoid two opposite mistakes. We should not overlook real progress simply because a child still needs help. We also should not describe a skill as independent when an adult is still doing important parts of it.

How Much Help Is Too Much?

One of the challenges with prompting is that adults naturally want to help. If a child is struggling to open a container, we may immediately open it for them. If a child is having difficulty putting on a shoe, we may reach down and finish the task.

Sometimes that is exactly the right thing to do. Children need help, and there is nothing wrong with providing it. A child may be tired, hurt, overwhelmed, or dealing with a task that is temporarily beyond their current abilities. Helping is not a failure of teaching.

At the same time, if we always complete difficult tasks for children, we may unintentionally reduce their opportunities to develop independence. The child may learn that an adult will take over as soon as the task becomes difficult, or that their own attempts are unnecessary.

I often encourage adults to ask themselves a simple question:

What is the least amount of help this child needs to be successful right now?

Sometimes the answer is a verbal reminder. Sometimes it is a gesture or a demonstration. Sometimes the child needs the task broken into smaller steps, a visual support, a change in the materials, or more direct assistance.

The answer may change from one opportunity to the next. A child may need substantial help in the morning when they are tired and much less help later in the day. A child may manage a familiar cup but need assistance with a new container. As the child learns, we should continually reassess whether the same level of assistance is still necessary.

Providing the least amount of effective help does not mean withholding support to make a child struggle. It means paying attention to what the child needs and avoiding assistance that has become unnecessary.

The Importance of Fading Prompts

Prompt fading means gradually reducing assistance so that the child becomes more independent [1]. This is one of the most important parts of effective prompting. Without a plan to reduce prompts, a child may learn to depend on the adult's help rather than the natural instruction, materials, or situation.

Imagine we are teaching a child to follow a visual schedule. Initially, the adult might point to the schedule and say, "Check your schedule." If the child does not respond, the adult may provide additional assistance to help them locate the next activity.

Over time, we want to reduce those prompts. Perhaps the child begins checking the schedule after a simple verbal reminder. Eventually, the child may independently look at the schedule when an activity ends, without needing the adult to say anything.

That is meaningful progress. The child is not just completing the routine. They are becoming less dependent on someone else to guide them through it.

Prompt fading should be planned around the child's actual performance. If we reduce help too quickly, the child may experience repeated failure. If we keep providing the same help after the child no longer needs it, we may limit independence. Good teaching involves watching the response and adjusting support accordingly.

It can also help to vary the timing and form of prompts when appropriate. If a child responds only after hearing one particular phrase, seeing one particular gesture, or waiting for one particular adult, we should consider whether the child is learning the skill or waiting for a prompt. The goal is for the relevant natural cues to become useful to the child.

Physical Prompting Requires Special Care

Physical prompts can sometimes be useful when teaching motor skills, but they require careful consideration. A child may be uncomfortable with physical guidance, have sensory sensitivities, or resist being touched. Physical prompting should be individualized, respectful, and consistent with the child's assent and applicable professional standards.

We should also consider whether a less intrusive form of assistance could accomplish the same goal. Modeling, visual supports, environmental arrangements, and breaking a task into smaller steps may be more effective than physically guiding a child's movements. If the child is resisting physical assistance, that response is important information.

The purpose of prompting is to support learning, not to force a child's body through an activity. We want the child to become an active participant in learning rather than someone whose movements are controlled by an adult.

This does not mean that every child must be able to refuse every form of assistance in every situation. Adults still have responsibilities related to health, safety, and care. It does mean that routine teaching should be respectful, individualized, and attentive to the child's communication. When a child shows discomfort, we should consider whether the task, the environment, the prompt, or the teaching plan needs to change.



Give Children Opportunities to Try

Sometimes the most useful help is creating a little space for the child to attempt the next step. If a child is putting on a shoe, we might position the shoe so it is easier to reach, offer a brief reminder, and wait. If the child is opening a container, we might loosen the lid without removing it completely. If the child is following a schedule, we might place the schedule where it is easy to see instead of immediately telling the child what to do next.

These small changes can make a task more accessible while preserving the child's opportunity to respond. They also give us better information. We can see which part of the task the child understands and where additional teaching is needed.

Waiting can be difficult for adults, especially when we are in a hurry. We may be tempted to step in because it is faster. Sometimes that is the practical choice. But when time allows, a brief pause can create an important opportunity for independence.

The pause should not become a test or a performance demand. If the child is becoming frustrated, we can offer more support. The point is not to make the child prove that they can do something without help. The point is to notice when they are ready to take the next part of the task themselves.

Helping Children Experience Success

I think one of the most satisfying moments in teaching is when a child does something independently that previously required assistance. Maybe the child finally draws the plus sign without help. Maybe they check their schedule independently or put on their shoes without reminders.

Those moments are important because they represent genuine learning. The adult's assistance has served its purpose, and the child can now perform the skill without depending on that assistance. That is what we should be working toward.

Progress may not happen all at once. A child might first complete one step independently, then need help with the next. They might respond independently with one set of materials but need support in a different setting. They might still need a reminder on difficult days. These variations do not erase the progress. They help us understand what the child has learned and what still needs to be taught.

It is also important to celebrate communication about help. A child who says, signs, or uses an AAC system to request assistance is demonstrating a useful form of independence. Independence does not mean never needing anyone. It includes knowing how to get the support you need and participating in decisions about how that support is provided.

The Art of Prompting

The next time you are helping a child complete a task, think about what you are trying to accomplish. Are you simply trying to get the activity finished, or are you helping the child develop a skill they can use independently?



Sometimes the best teaching decision is to provide more help. Sometimes it is to change the task, offer a visual cue, or demonstrate the response. Sometimes it is to pause and give the child a little more opportunity to try.

The art of prompting is knowing the difference. We help children so they can succeed, and we gradually make room for them to do more of the work themselves.

References

- [1] 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>] [2] Behavior Analyst Certification Board. (2020). *Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts*. [<https://www.bacb.com/ethics-information/ethics-codes/>]
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<https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/the-difference-between-helping-a-child-and-doing-it-for-them>

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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