Least-to-Most Prompting

What is least-to-most prompting? A prompt is a cue or hint meant to encourage a child to perform a desired behavior such as saying a word or phrase on his or her speech generating device (SGD). A least-to-most prompting hierarchy (also known as system of least prompts) is a prompting hierarchy in which the *least* amount of prompting is provided at the *beginning* with additional cues provided within a specified interval and order as needed (i.e., with increasing assistance).

Why use least-to-most prompting? Some children quickly become dependent on prompts and wait for an adult to provide that prompt before they make any type of response. While prompts are useful tools in teaching, it is important to use them carefully. Least-to-most prompting allows children time to respond to a natural stimulus occurring in the environment and one in which typically developing peers typically use when communicating (Wolery et al., 1986). Children should be able to communicate *without* becoming stimulus dependent (i.e., only communicating in response to "point to the ___" or "tell me ___" commands). Remember, compliance is *not* communication.

How do I use least to most prompting? First, select a response latency (i.e., an appropriate wait time that the child needs to produce a word or message). This wait time will be longer for children using slower access methods like scanning than for children using direct selection. Response latencies can range from 5-30 seconds (and even longer for some children). Next, say something to the child and wait the specified time for a response. If the child says something, respond and move on. If an error or no response occurs, give the next prompt in the hierarchy.

Not all of the following prompt types will be used for all children. Select the prompts that are most appropriate and useful for each individual child in order from least to most assistance.

1. *Contextual cues* are cues that result from natural communication opportunities (e.g., when someone says "hi" to you, the natural expectation is that you will greet the person in return). When providing a contextual cue, make sure to follow it with an **expectant pause**. Expectant pausing allows children time to respond and is a stimulus occurring in the natural environment.
2. *Indirect verbal cue* is a verbal cue that lets the child know that communication needs to happen but doesn't contain the target word or phrase (e.g., saying "uh oh, your crackers are all gone," to elicit a request for *more* or "boy, that looks hard" to encourage a child to ask for *help*). NOTE: Avoid asking yes/no questions. If you ask the child, "Do you want a cookie?" the natural, acceptable response is a head nod/shake!
3. *Searching cue* is a sweeping gesture orienting the student to the speech generating device or board (e.g., waving a hand or flashlight across the communication device).

4. **Positional cue** involves changing the position of the device (e.g., holding the device in front of the child when it's his/her turn to say something).
5. *Direct verbal cue* is spoken cue that contains the target word or message. Direct verbal prompts often include a "tell me" or "say" command (e.g., "If you need help tell me 'NEED HELP'"). For individuals using scanning, a direct verbal cue may also include telling the individual when to hit their switch (e.g., saying "That's the one I want" when the target icon is highlighted.)
6. **Gestural cue** involves using a finger or light to show the individual the target message (e.g., pointing to the symbol "MORE").
7. **Tactile cue** is primarily used with individuals using scanning, a tactile cue involves touching an individual's switch site when it is time to make a selection (e.g., touching the child's switch site when the target icon is highlighted).
8. **Indirect Physical cue** is a movement directing the individual toward the target message (e.g., gently nudging the individual at the elbow to move his/her hand toward the device).
9. **Direct Physical cue** involves physical manipulation of the individual to make a selection (e.g., hand-over-hand assistance).

Research evidence demonstrates that least-to-most prompting has been effective in:
- Teaching children with developmental disabilities to locate an out-of-reach SGD (Sigafoos et al., 2004);
- Teaching children to initiate a request to play (Johnston et al., 2003);
- Teaching children to use gestures (McLaughlin & Cascella, 2008)
- Teaching AAC users to comment (Buzolich et al., 1991).
- Teaching children to request objects (Glennen & Calculator, 1985).

CAUTION ⚠️
- It is important that one be aware of one's own non-verbal communication cues given when working with a child. Be careful not to give prompts *unconsciously* (e.g., looking at the correct choice, pausing longer when providing the correct response) as a child can learn to depend on a prompt even if you are unaware you are doing it.
- Untrained conversational partners may unintentionally "restrict the AAC users' needs and opportunities to communicate by anticipating their wants and needs to the point that communication is no longer necessary" (Calculator, 1988). When we anticipate wants and needs, ask questions, present choices, or instruct a child to respond before giving him or her an opportunity to initiate a message, we preempt communication. Make sure all communication partners are familiar with the prompting hierarchy and start with the least amount of prompting.
- "Current teaching practice which employs hand-over-hand modeling, combined with frequent verbal and gestural prompting… may limit the effectiveness of modeling in atypical learners" (Biederman, Fairhall, Raven & Davey, 1998, p. 510).