DRAGEN ACADEMY · FREE LESSON · PARENTS, TEACHERS, TECHNICIANS, NEW BCBAS · 7 MINUTES

How to help without doing it for them.

Esta lección en español

What it is. A **prompt** is extra help that makes the right response more likely: a spoken hint, a point, showing how, or guiding their hands. **Prompt fading** is taking that help away on a plan, so the skill ends up theirs instead of yours.

Why it matters. Help that never fades becomes part of the skill. The child waits for the point, the touch on the elbow, the "and then?" That is called **prompt dependence**, and it is a common reason a skill works with one adult and nowhere else. The fix isn't less help at the start. It's a written plan for taking the help away.

HOW TO DO IT YOURSELF

How to plan your help yourself, in five steps.

1. **Say what "alone" looks like.** One sentence a stranger could check: "Zips his coat to the top within 10 seconds of 'Zip up.'" That is a goal a stranger could measure.
2. **List the help you could give, from most to least.** Full physical (your hands guide theirs), partial physical (a light touch at the wrist or elbow), model (you show, they copy), gesture (a point or a nod), spoken hint. Then alone. That list is your **prompt hierarchy**.
3. **Pick a way to fade it.** Most-to-least, least-to-most or time delay, below.
4. **Write the moving rule before you start.** For example: two correct in a row at one level, drop a level; two misses in a row, go back up one. When every adult uses the same rule, the child isn't learning four different helpers.

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5. **Write down the help on every try.** FP, PP, M, G, V, or I for alone. Help that is fading shows up as a column of codes moving toward I.

MOST-TO-LEAST

Start with the most help they need to get it right, then give less as they succeed. Few mistakes, so it suits brand-new skills and learners who get upset by errors. The risk: staying at one level longer than they need.

LEAST-TO-MOST

Give the instruction and wait a few seconds. Nothing, or a mistake? Give the smallest help, then more, until it's right. It suits a learner who can already do part of the skill. The risk: more mistakes on the way.

TIME DELAY

At first the help comes at the same moment as the instruction, so they can't get it wrong. Then you wait a set few seconds before helping, so they can answer first. It suits answers and labels ("What's this?"), and it's easy for every adult to run the same way.

Which one is best? It depends on the learner. In one study, children with autism learning to build play structures all learned with most-to-least and made fewer errors with it, but three of them learned faster with least-to-most. A second study added a short wait before the help, which gave the children a chance to start on their own while keeping errors low (Libby, Weiss, Bancroft & Ahearn, 2008). Start with a plan, write down the help, and change the plan if the codes stop moving.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Leo and the zipper, twelve tries.

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Made-up example. The child, the tries and the rule are invented to show the method. Leo is the boy from the task analysis lesson who stops before the zipper.

His team picks most-to-least with the rule above: two correct in a row, drop a level; two misses in a row, go back up one. One practice, twelve tries:

Try	Help	Zipped?	The rule says
1	Full physical	Yes	
2	Full physical	Yes	Two in a row: drop a level
3	Partial physical	Yes	
4	Partial physical	Yes	Two in a row: drop a level
5	Model	No	One miss: stay
6	Model	Yes	
7	Model	Yes	Two in a row: drop a level
8	Gesture	Yes	
9	Gesture	Yes	Two in a row: drop a level
10	Alone	Yes	
11	Alone	Yes	
12	Alone	Yes	

Three of twelve alone, and the help faded in one practice. Look at try 5: one miss at the model level didn't send him back up, because the rule says two. His team's plan for tomorrow: start at gesture, one level above where he finished, and fade again, writing down the help on every try.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

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Ways help turns into dependence.

- Helping before they've had a chance. Count the seconds; the wait is part of the plan.
- Saying the instruction again and again. The repeats become the prompt. Say it once, then help.
- Writing a helped try down as "alone." Only a try with no help at all counts.
- Accidental prompts: looking at the right answer, a hopeful tone, a hand hovering near the zipper.
- Fading by feel. Four adults with four ideas of "ready" stall a skill. Write the rule.
- The same help level for weeks. If the codes aren't moving, change the plan, not the child.

TRY IT

One question, then the answer.

A made-up try: you say "Hang up your coat," wait three seconds, nothing happens, so you point at the hook, and she hangs it up. Which method is this, and what do you write down for the try?

▼ Show the answer, and why

Least-to-most, and you write G for gesture, not I. You gave her a chance first, then the smallest help that worked. The try was correct, but with a point, so it doesn't count as alone. Writing it down as I would make the help look faded before it is.

Something to keep

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Prompt fading plan.

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Skill	What “alone” looks like (a stranger could check it)

Help, most to least	Code	What it looks like for this skill
Full physical	FP	
Partial physical	PP	
Model	M	
Gesture	G	
Spoken hint	V	
Alone	I	No help at all

Method (circle): most-to-least · least-to-most · time delay of ___ seconds
Drop a level when:
Go back up when:

Try	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Help code										
Correct?										

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Alone today: ____ of 10 · Start tomorrow at: ____

WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

A second pair of eyes.

Writing the plan is the easy part. Fading on schedule, across every adult in a child's day, is the hard part.

DRAGENfamily, the hub at home, logs what you see as it happens and shows the last two weeks as a graph, so every adult works from the same page. The paper version above works tonight.

Free on this page, and yours to keep: the lesson and its printable sheet. No email, no login.

SOURCE

Where this comes from.

Cooper, Heron & Heward, *Applied Behavior Analysis* (3rd ed., 2020), the chapter on stimulus control: response prompts, most-to-least, least-to-most and time delay. Libby, Weiss, Bancroft & Ahearn (2008), *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 1(1), 37–43: most-to-least and least-to-most prompting compared.

Examples on this page are made up. They contain no client, student or family information. This lesson teaches a method; it does not replace your BCBA, your program, or your payer's written rules.

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