



Understanding Prompt Levels in ABA and Why Following Them Matters

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In Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), prompting is an important teaching tool used to help individuals learn new skills. A prompt is any kind of help given to increase the chance that a learner will respond correctly. This help can be physical, verbal, or even a simple gesture. Prompts are not meant to be permanent—they are temporary supports that should be reduced over time as the learner becomes more independent.

For example, if a child is learning to wave “hello,” a therapist might start by physically guiding their hand. Over time, that help is reduced until the child can wave on their own without any assistance.

What Are Prompt Levels?

Prompt levels (also called prompt hierarchies) are the different types of help that can be given, usually organized from most support to least support. These levels are carefully planned to help the learner succeed while working toward independence.

Common prompt levels include:

Full Physical Prompt

- Hand-over-hand assistance
- The most support is given

Partial Physical Prompt

- Light touch or guidance (e.g., tapping the elbow)
- Less help than full physical

Model Prompt

- Demonstrating the correct behavior
- The learner watches and copies

Gestural Prompt

- Pointing, nodding, or using body language
- No physical contact

Verbal Prompt

- Giving spoken hints or instructions
- Example: “Say hello”

Independent (No Prompt)

- The learner responds correctly without help
- This is the goal

These prompts are often used in order, depending on the learner’s needs and the plan created for them.

What Is Prompt Fading?

Prompt fading means slowly reducing the amount of help given so the learner can become independent. This is a key part of teaching in ABA.

- Prompts should not be used forever
- Support is gradually decreased over time
- Independent responses are encouraged and rewarded

This connects to Reinforcement, which means increasing behavior by giving something valuable after a correct response. In ABA, independent responses are usually reinforced more than prompted ones.

If prompts are not faded properly, the learner may become dependent on help and struggle to respond on their own.

Why It Is Important to Follow the BCBA's Plan

Prompt levels and strategies are not chosen randomly. They are carefully designed by your client's BCBA, based on assessments and data.

Following the plan exactly is important for several reasons:

Consistency

- Everyone working with the learner uses the same approach
- Helps the learner understand expectations

Better Learning

- Too much help → prompt dependency
- Too little help → more mistakes and frustration

Accurate Data Collection

- Data shows the learner's true abilities
- Inconsistent prompting can make progress unclear

Ethical Practice

- Following procedures supports quality care

Real Life Example

Imagine teaching a child to identify colors:

- You might start with a model prompt (showing the correct color)
- Then move to a gestural prompt (pointing)
- Finally, the child responds independently

If someone skips steps or always gives too much help, the child may not learn to answer on their own.

Common Mistakes with Prompting

- Giving too much help for too long
- Not following the prompt hierarchy
- Skipping steps in the plan
- Not fading prompts over time
- Being inconsistent between staff

Prompting is a powerful tool in ABA, but it must be used carefully and systematically. The goal is always to help the learner become as independent as possible. By understanding prompt levels and following the plan created by the BCBA, therapists can support meaningful learning and long-term success.

If you're ever unsure about a situation, please reach out to your supervisor. We're here to support you.

Thank you for the care, professionalism, and heart you bring to this work every day.

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