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Prompting/Errorless Learning

We all know prompting is a strategy to encourage responses from our learners. But, did you know there are right ways and wrong ways to prompt? Prompting, done incorrectly, can decrease learner success.

Think about this scenario: Gene is learning to respond verbally to, "What is this?" His teacher/therapist/mom/para says, "What is this?" Gene responds incorrectly. So his helper says, "Try again. Come on you know this one." Gene responds incorrectly again. The helper then says, "Come on, try harder. It is something you eat." Gene still doesn't get it. What just happened? Well, unfortunately, Gene just gave three incorrect responses. He practiced the wrong answers three times-not a good way to learn.

Consider another way to prompt. This is called errorless learning, and it may seem that we are just giving Gene the answers. But really, we are helping Gene practice the correct answer. The helper says, "What is this? Say apple." Gene responds with apple and is reinforced. Then the helper says, "What is this?" and gives Gene the first sound in the word she wants. Gene responds with apple and is again reinforced. Finally the helper says, "What is this?" and Gene says apple and is again reinforced. Two things are happening here. First, Gene has practiced the correct response three times! Secondly, he has been reinforced three times, and what do we know about reinforcement? Remember, reinforcement makes it more likely a behavior (giving the correct response in this case) will happen. What a difference!

Here's a list of tips to help you achieve errorless learning. Don't forget to reinforce these prompted responses, but you might provide the most desired reinforcers for your most independent responses.

- Give the answer immediately after the stimulus or request.
- Give the first sound of the response you want.
- Give an easy choice to obtain the response. For example, if you say, "Name a food," immediately say, "Dump truck or carrot?" The choices are very far apart, and the likelihood you'll get carrot is increased.
- If you are using pictures, immediately point to the picture of the response you want.
- Placing the picture with the correct response closer to your learner increases the possibility of success.

- Provide a large picture of the correct response versus a small picture of the incorrect response.
- You might use a color versus a black and white picture.
- Maybe you are building something with your learner. Have an identical set of materials and model what you want the child to do as you give the stimulus or command.

You can think of many more ideas to increase the likelihood of correct responses. A prompted correct response is better than multiple trials practicing incorrect responses. Don't be afraid to prompt! Just be sure you fade prompting as your learner progresses.