

Prompt Hierarchy Quick-Reference Card

For RBTs, Behavior Technicians, Educators & Parents implementing teaching programs

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What is a prompt hierarchy? A prompt hierarchy is a structured sequence of prompts ordered from *most intrusive/supportive* to *least intrusive* (or vice versa). Using a prompt hierarchy consistently helps learners acquire new skills while building toward **independent responding** — answering or performing without any prompting.

PROMPT TYPES — ORDERED FROM MOST TO LEAST INTRUSIVE

FP

FULL PHYSICAL

Practitioner provides complete hand-over-hand guidance through the entire target response.

Example: guiding a learner's hand completely through placing a puzzle piece.

PP

PARTIAL PHYSICAL

Light physical guidance — a touch, nudge, or partial assist — without completing the movement for the learner.

Example: a gentle tap on the elbow to initiate reaching for an object.

MOD

MODELING

Demonstrate the target response for the learner to imitate. Can be full or partial modeling.

Example: picking up the spoon and putting it in the bowl, then handing it back.

GES

GESTURAL

A physical gesture (point, nod, gaze shift) directs the learner without physical contact or modeling.

Example: pointing to the correct picture card on the table.

VIS

VISUAL / POSITIONAL

Environmental cue: a picture schedule, color code, written cue, or object placement that guides responding.

Example: placing the correct item closer to the learner as a positional cue.

VRB

VERBAL

A spoken instruction, hint, or partial verbal prompt (first sound, partial phrase) delivered without gestures or physical assist.

Example: saying "What do you want?" or providing the first sound "Wa—".



Independent (IND): The learner responds correctly within the latency window with NO prompt. This is the goal of every program. Data every trial.

DELIVERY STRATEGIES

Most-to-Least (MTL) **ERRORLESS**

- ▶ Begin with the most intrusive prompt (often FP) to guarantee a correct response.
- ▶ Systematically reduce prompt level across sessions as the learner demonstrates mastery at each level.
- ▶ Best for: new skills, learners with limited repertoire, tasks requiring safety.
- ▶ Goal: fade prompts as quickly as data allow — avoid prompt dependency.

Least-to-Most (LTM) **GRADUATED**

- ▶ Give the natural cue / SD first; wait for independent response (2–5 sec).
- ▶ If no correct response, deliver the least intrusive prompt. Continue up the hierarchy only if needed.
- ▶ Best for: skills the learner is close to mastering; reducing learned helplessness.
- ▶ Stops as soon as the learner responds correctly — never deliver more support than needed.

THE HIERARCHY AT A GLANCE

Full Physical (FP)

← **Most intrusive**



Partial Physical (PP)



Modeling (MOD)



Gestural (GES)



Visual / Positional (VIS)



Verbal (VRB)



★ **Independent (IND)**

← **Goal**

MTL: start top → fade down | LTM: start bottom → move up only if needed

PROMPT FADING PRINCIPLES

1

Plan Ahead

Define your fading criteria BEFORE the session. Decide how many correct responses at what level trigger moving to the next step.

2

Data Every Trial

Record the prompt level used AND whether the response was correct. You cannot fade what you do not measure.

3

Reinforce Independence

Deliver the highest-magnitude reinforcement for prompted-free (independent) responses. Differentially reinforce lower prompt levels.

4

Transfer Control

Pair prompts with the natural SD so the natural cue gains stimulus control. The prompt should become unnecessary — not a permanent fixture.

WHEN TO USE WHICH STRATEGY

SITUATION	STRATEGY	WHY	WATCH OUT FOR
Brand-new skill with zero prior responding	Most-to-Least (MTL)	Prevents error practice; builds fluency from a supported correct response	Fading too slowly → prompt dependency
Skill the learner is almost mastering	Least-to-Most (LTM)	Gives learner a chance to be independent first; avoids unnecessary support	Waiting too long between prompts → frustration
Safety skill (e.g., stop at curb)	MTL with slow fade	Errors in safety contexts carry real risk; errorless learning is non-negotiable	Fading before fluency is established
Maintenance / generalization probe	No prompt — natural SD only	Probes measure true stimulus control; prompting invalidates the probe	Accidentally prompting during probes (even gesturally)
Learner showing prompt dependency	LTM with extended wait	Extending latency re-establishes independent responding as the first behavior	Giving in to challenging behavior by prompting prematurely

Error Correction ≠ Prompting

If an error occurs, implement your program's error-correction procedure (e.g., model → test → distractor → retest) rather than simply re-delivering the trial with a higher prompt. Error correction targets the specific incorrect response; prompting prevents errors. Know which procedure your program calls for before every session.

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For implementation guidance specific to your learner, consult the supervising behavior analyst on record.