



Contact Information

Website:

www.coe.fau.edu/card/

Boca Raton Campus

777 Glades Road
Boca Raton, FL. 33431

Main Line: 561/ 297-2023

Toll Free: 1-888-632-6395

Fax: 561/297-2507

Port St Lucie Campus

500 NW California Blvd.
Port St Lucie, FL. 34986

Main Line: 561/ 297-2023

Toll Free: 1-888-632-6395

Fax: 772/ 873-3369



**CENTER FOR AUTISM
AND RELATED
DISABILITIES**



FACT SHEET – ERRORLESS TEACHING

Errorless Teaching

Errorless teaching is an instructional strategy that ensures children always respond correctly. As each skill is taught, children are provided with a prompt or cue immediately following an instruction. The immediate prompt prevents any chance for incorrect responses. Unlike other teaching procedures where opportunities for initial mistakes are allowed and then corrected through prompting, errorless learning’s immediate prompting ensures that a child may only respond correctly. Prompts are systematically removed until children are able to respond correctly on their own.

The theory behind errorless teaching is that children with autism do not learn as successfully from their mistakes as typical children may, but instead continue to repeat them. Research suggests that frustration following incorrect responses associated with trial and error learning can actually provoke problem behavior such as tantrums, aggression, and self-injury. Using an initial prompt, before the child has an opportunity to respond incorrectly, avoids any chance of teaching a chain of errors and bypasses the discouragement that may come from incorrect responding.

The Role of Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is providing something after a behavior that increases the likelihood of the behavior occurring again in the future. Errorless teaching uses positive reinforcement combined with prompting strategies to teach new skills. Instructions are immediately followed by a prompted correct response, which is then followed positive reinforcement.

Example:

Teacher gives instruction, “*clap hands.*”

Teacher immediately prompts child by manipulating the child’s hands to make a clapping motion.

Teacher praises the child, “*nice job clapping your hands!*” and gives the child a reinforcer.

To promote independence the immediate prompts, or amount of help provided, are systematically decreased, or faded, to allow children the opportunity to provide correct responses on their own. Errorless teaching strategies used to decrease prompting and encourage independence may include time delay prompting and most-to-least prompting.

Time Delay Prompting:

Time delay is a prompt fading strategy that systematically increases the amount of time between the instruction and the prompt. This delaying of prompts gives children a brief window of opportunity to give a correct response on their own. As the child begins to respond independently before a prompt is given, the delay is continuously increased until it is faded out completely. Responses provided independently, before any assistance is given, are immediately followed by positive reinforcement.

Example:

(2 second delay)

Teacher gives instruction, “*clap hands.*”

Teacher waits 2 seconds and then manipulates the child's hands to make a clapping motion.
Teacher praises the child, "nice job clapping your hands!" and gives a reinforcer.

(3 second delay)

Teacher gives instruction, "clap hands."

Teacher waits 3 seconds for the child to respond independently.

If the child does not respond independently, the teacher manipulates the child's hands to make a clapping motion.

Teacher praises the child, "nice job clapping your hands!" and gives a reinforcer.

Most-to-Least Prompting

In most to least prompting, prompts are systematically faded by decreasing the intrusiveness of assistance provided to promote independence in responding.

Example:

(light physical prompt)

Teacher gives instruction, "clap hands"

Teacher immediately prompts child by providing a light physical prompt at the child's elbows to make a clapping motion.

Teacher praises the child, "nice job clapping your hands!" and gives a reinforcer.

(Gesture)

Teacher gives instruction, "clap hands"

Teacher immediately prompts child by raising hands slightly to gesture clapping without touching the child.

Child begins clapping hands.

Teacher praises the child, "nice job clapping your hands!" and gives a reinforcer.

Promoting Independence

It is important to collect data on how often children require prompts as well as how often they give independent responses. This information is used to determine when to decrease prompt levels. An example of decreasing prompt levels using *time delay* may be delaying prompts 2 seconds, then 3 seconds, and then 5 seconds. An example of decreasing prompts in *most-to-least prompting* may be lessening the intrusiveness from hand over hand, to a light physical touch, to shadowing the response without any physical contact.

For more information on prompting see the Prompting Fact Sheet.

Errors

Even with errorless teaching, errors may still occur. If a child makes an error, the teacher may withhold reinforcement and present a new instruction or withhold reinforcement and present the same instruction again providing an immediate full prompt of the correct answer. Errors should never be followed by negative comments, reinforcement, or presentation of a reward.

Suggested Readings

Touchette, P., & Howard, J. (1984). Errorless Learning: Reinforcement Contingencies and Stimulus Control Transfer in Delayed Prompting. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 17(2), 175–188.

Heflin, L. J. & Alberto, P. A. (2001). Establishing a behavioral context for learning for students with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 16, 93-101

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