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Modelling and prompting

Points to note

- It is hard for children with autism to acquire new skills by being told what to do; they rely more on modelling and prompts.
- The child may be unable to imagine what it would be like to master a new skill; that is, to imagine himself performing the activity and the feeling of pride and sense of achievement associated with learning that new skill.
- The child may have poor imitation skills. He may not 'pick up' new skills by simply watching another person. He may focus on irrelevant details and miss the point of the demonstration. He might miss the 'big picture'.
- The child might have quite good modelling skills and may be able to copy what you do. However he may still require a physical or verbal prompt in order to complete an activity because he gets 'stuck' and forgets what he has to do.

What you can do

- When teaching new skills, use a simple verbal prompt accompanied by a physical prompt (as long as the child is comfortable with physical contact.) Physical prompts should be withdrawn quickly but gradually, otherwise the child will come to depend on it. The verbal prompt can then be gradually withdrawn and replaced by a sign or gesture.
- Hand over hand modelling is a useful way of teaching physical skills, particularly those that require fine motor skills and manipulation, such as removing lids, threading beads, using pencils or painting. This method will give the child a 'physical experience' of performing the activity. This assistance can also be withdrawn gradually by allowing the child to complete more and more steps of the activity on his own.