

Section 6: How to Grade tasks and encourage independence:

Providing the right kind of challenge is important for a child to develop their skills. If too much is expected a child can feel frustrated and refuse to co-operate. If too little is expected or people step in too quickly to assist, the child may take longer to acquire that skill. Grading refers to how an activity is paced to demand the child's maximum independence.

There are many different aspects that can be graded in any one activity:

- The amount the child is expected to do. Step back and watch! **The golden rule is to first allow the child to attempt something and to see how much they can manage independently.** Give them time to attempt this and avoid the temptation to step in too quickly to save time.
- When you think that a child may need assistance it helps to ask the child whether they would like some help. It is useful to then take over and complete the activity but verbalise what you are doing so that this is a learning activity for the child. This method of completing activities after the child has started them is called forward chaining. Each time the child attempts the same activity encourage them to do a little more until they are able to do the whole sequence.
- Another method that can be used to teach a child a new skill is called backward chaining. This involves starting off the activity for the child (while verbalising what you are doing and allowing them to see what you are doing) but then expecting the child to complete the last step in order to finish the whole task. When they are confident in doing the last step, gradually expect them to do the last two steps and then when confident with this, ask them to do the last three steps. Carry on like this and over a period of time the child should be able to complete the whole process.
- Learning new skills does require time to consolidate the skill so do not be afraid to spend a little longer on one step to perfect it before moving onto the next. If the child however is tending to start the next step it would be appropriate to let them continue as they are motivated. Allow repetition over time.
- Children who are Dyspraxic are often unable to retain the knowledge of how to achieve a task. This can often be perceived as them "playing up" when they cannot repeat what they did the previous week. Be patient with them and re-demonstrate how to do this task. Repetition for is essential for these children.

- Grade the amount of distractions in the environment. Start learning new tasks in a quiet environment with few distractions and later introduce more distraction.

- The kind of instructions given can be graded. These could be verbal, non-verbal or physical prompts. At first you may need to use all three together but as the child's skill improves you may be able to reduce this so that you are only giving them a verbal prompt and then later no prompts at all. It is important to gradually withdraw help as the child's skill improves so that they become independent. You may also find it beneficial for the child to tell you what they need to do next so that they are internalising the process. It is important to keep the instructions consistent (especially with learning letter formation etc) to reduce the risk of confusion. It is also useful in using association to help with new tasks. Keep instructions short and concise. Start with one instruction at a time before attempting a sequence. Use visual cards / concise written prompts for children who have difficulty in retaining verbal information or poor organisational skills.

- The actual equipment or task can also be changed. This can be done by grading the size (e.g. large to small), the properties (i.e. using card to cut rather than paper initially) or the style of equipment (using self opening scissors initially).
For e.g., when learning how to do buttons it is easier to start with bigger buttons and gradually reduce their size so that they can fasten smaller buttons.

- Reward and praise is extremely important. Sometimes a child will not be successful at a task and be acutely aware of this so ensure you provide positive feedback about the attempts that they have made.

- The use of sensory input to assist is very important. Please refer to the section on "multisensory strategies" and "handwriting " for ideas. Note that additional sensory input can again be withdrawn as the child's skill improves.

- Using compensatory strategies can also be used but should be faded out when no longer necessary. For example when the child needs prompting to hold his paper still with his non-dominant hand it may be useful to put a sticker on his work that he needs to cover with his left hand. Leave this on for a couple of days and then leave the sticker off and see whether he stills needs this prompt.