

Teaching the Child to Label (Tact) Objects and Pictures

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Once the child has many things he is able to request (mand), instructors should begin adding other tasks between opportunities to mand. The number of tasks required between the opportunities to mand should be gradually increased and full prompts should be provided for all new tasks so that the child remains successful. Full prompting means that the instructor should help the child respond correctly in whatever way possible. For example, if you are teaching motor imitation or a receptive instruction, physically move the child's body to perform the action and reinforce him for a successful imitation. Then, gradually fade the physical prompt until the child is able to perform the action or follow the instruction without the physical prompt. Gradually add different tasks between the prompted and unprompted responses. Typically, the best early skills to introduce between requests (mands) include motor imitation tasks, matching tasks, simple receptive instructions, and receptive discrimination of objects.

For "early learners" (i.e. children who are just learning to communicate), most of instruction should still be occurring in the context of activities that the child finds enjoyable. For example, motor imitation might be taught while doing songs and finger plays or while playing with toys. Receptive discrimination of object may be taught while cleaning up toys when a child is finished or discrimination of pictures may be taught while reading books. Simple instructions such as "touch" or "give me" can be taught by teaching the child to touch reinforcers or giving up reinforcers on request. As discussed earlier, teaching a child to give up reinforcers is an important part of teaching the child to request and will be necessary in order to use those reinforcers to teach.

The next type of functional communication (verbal behavior) that we want to teach the child involves labeling (tacting) objects that he is in contact with. While requesting actually benefits the child because he gets what he is asking for, the tact does not result in the same type of reinforcement. In other words, the child is saying the name of something, not because he wants it, but because an instructor has asked him what the object is called or simply because he has come in contact with the item and this behavior has been reinforced.

A "pure tact" is considered to be a person's use of language to label or describe something he is currently in contact with. For example, if a child says, "That's my mommy" while looking at a picture of his mother, he is tacting. In "real life" children rarely exhibit "pure tacts". In other words, they are typically not tacting things purely because they come in contact with them but because they want the people around them to notice something or pay attention to them. Take the two year old who is looking at a book with his mother and says "horse!" while pointing to the horse and looking up at his mother. This verbal behavior is actually serving two functions, labeling (tacting) and requesting (manding) attention. In fact, it would appear quite odd for a child to walk into a room and begin spontaneously labeling the things he sees! Unfortunately, this is sometimes what has been unintentionally taught to children with Autism when spontaneous tacting is taught as a separate skill from manding for attention.

Typically developing children begin labeling items in their environment very early in their acquisition of language. They don't often do this when alone in a room or just because they see something but in order to "reference" or call the attention of the parent or caregiver to the object. The attention the child receives for this behavior reinforces this type of labeling (tacting) behavior. This is an important point to consider. If we want the child to spontaneously label things they come in contact with, we have to continue to make our presence and the attention we give the child reinforcing.



In order to learn new things that may involve objects or actions that the child is not necessarily interested in, it is important that the child is able to give labels on request. Early labels are often best transferred from requests (mands). The author suggests that it is best to wait until the child is able to request (mand) many items and spontaneously tacts objects in the environment before introducing targets for which the child has not requested (has no EO for item). This is because this behavior (spontaneous tacting) indicates that “talking” has been so heavily paired with reinforcement that talking “itself” has become reinforcing. In addition, it indicates the teaching team has been successful at continuing to be so heavily paired with reinforcement that the child finds their attention reinforcing!

During initial training, we want the child to learn to label (tact) when he hears a variety of different questions such as “What’s this?”, “What’s that?”, “What do you call this thing?” as well as being able to label things when the instructor just points to the object and does not ask a question. Finally, as discussed above, we want the child to be able to tact items in attempts to gain our attention to the item. We want to be sure that when we teach a child to label things, we teach him to respond in a “flexible” manner and not just when he hears “What’s that?”. This can be accomplished by using transfer procedures. Once a child is able to respond to “What’s that?”, follow with a different question. Example:

Instructor: “What’s that?”
 STUDENT: “Cow.”
 Instructor: “What’s that thing called?”
 STUDENT: “Cow.”

This function of language (verbal behavior) is taught in the same manner with both vocal and signing children. It is, however, much harder to teach this function to children who are using other forms of augmentative communication (i.e. communication boards, picture exchange, object exchange). This is because, when the child labels (tacts) something, he is actually matching. Consider the child with a communication board. If the instructor asks, “What’s this?” while holding up a ball, the child would touch the picture of the ball on his board in response. If the child is not receiving the item following touching the picture, the behavior is not really a mand, however, it is not really a tact either because the child is matching a picture to an object which is a different skill than tacting.

There are 4 basic ways to teach a child to label things. The first involves using the child’s skill in requesting (manding) to transfer to the tact. The mands used for this training should be very strong. In other words, the child should be consistently requesting the item, with no prompts needed from a variety of people in a variety of settings. If transfers are conducted too soon, before the mands are fluent, the child may easily chain responses together. For example, the child may “learn” that he’s supposed to say the name of what he wants, stomp his feet, and stand up, and say the name again in order to get what he wants!

1. What if the child is able to request many things but does not respond when I ask, “What’s this?”

Mand to tact transfer- The name of this transfer procedure is deceptive because we actually ask the child to tact the item first. During initial training, the child is actually just manding the item in response to a new question; however, as we gradually add different trials between the initial label (tact) and the request (mand) the child learns to tact the item when asked. During initial training, the child is most likely going to respond by saying/signing the item when he sees it due to the history of being reinforced by getting the item. Be sure to use tasks the child has mastered between the tact and mand trials. We want to be teaching only one new skill at a time!



Instructor: (*holding up a favorite reinforcer*) "What's this?"
 STUDENT: "Ball."
 Instructor: "What do you want?"
 STUDENT: "Ball." (*child gets ball, plays with it a little while*)
 Instructor: "Give me the ball."
 STUDENT: <child gives instructor the ball> (the child has been taught to give up reinforcers)
 Instructor: "What's this?"
 STUDENT: "Ball."
 Instructor: "Do this." (hitting a ball with a hammer)
 STUDENT: <child hits ball> (a mastered imitative response)
 Instructor: "Give me the hammer"
 STUDENT: <child gives hammer> (a mastered response)
 Instructor: "What do you want?"
 STUDENT: "Ball."

For some children, this can also be accomplished by having the tact trial follow the mand trial. For example, right after requesting and getting the ball, the instructor might ask the child, "What's this?". The child may very well "tact" the ball, especially if the instructor places her hand on the ball interrupting the play but for other children, since there is no "EO" or desire to obtain the ball, they will not respond. This leaves the instructor in a tough spot because we can't "pull those words out of the child's mouth" to get him to respond! If the echoic is not under instructional control and the child doesn't respond under this condition, the instructor should answer the question herself and move on. For children with strong fill-in responses, this type of question/answer model can become a type of "fill-in" task for some children.

Instructor: "What's this?"
 STUDENT: (No response in 2 seconds)
 Instructor: "Ball. What this?" ("b" - as a phonemic prompt)
 STUDENT: "Ball."

Just remember that we want to avoid teaching the child "NOT" to respond to questions so if the child does not respond in this situation, a different transfer procedure should be used.

A second procedure can be used which involves the use of mastered requests (mands). This involves having two of the child's favorite things available. First assess which of the items the child has the strongest desire for (EO) and use that item as the reinforcer. Use the other item as the one to use to teach the tact.

(Instructor has candy and a book available and has determined that the child really wants to look at the book but will take the candy if offered)

Instructor: (*holds up candy*) "What's this?"
 STUDENT: "Candy."
 Instructor: "Great! What do you want?" (Holds out book)
 STUDENT: "Book."

2. What if the child is able to point to pictures but does not respond when I ask, "What's this?"



Receptive to tact transfer- It is easy to prompt a receptive identification of a picture or object by physically assisting the child to touch the desired item (physical prompt) or by modeling the correct response (imitative prompt). Many children will start spontaneously naming the items when they point to them. If so, the receptive response can be easily transferred to a label (tact) because the child is likely to repeat the response they just gave.

Instructor: "Touch the car."
 STUDENT: "Car." (while pointing to the car)
 Instructor: "What's this?"
 STUDENT: "Car."

If the child doesn't respond under this condition, the instructor can give the first sound to prompt (phonemic prompt). If the child still doesn't respond, the full answer should be given. Remember to prompt within 2-3 seconds.

3. What if the child is able to imitate (echo) consistently when I say "Say, " but does not respond when I ask, "What's this?"

Echo to tact transfer- Again, get a mastered response and transfer it to a new condition.

Instructor: "Say, car."
 STUDENT: "Car."
 Instructor: "What's this?"
 STUDENT: "Car."

4. What if the child is able to fill-in words during many common activities but does not respond when I ask, "What's this?"

Fill-in to tact transfer- If the child has responded to fill-in tasks in the past, this response can be transferred to the tact. Remember, the fill-in type of response has no "requirement" of a response from a child so it is often much easier to use and helps us avoid using too many questions when first teaching language. Once the child is consistently filling in the name of the item, begin transferring to the tact.

Instructor: "We wash hands in the _____."
 STUDENT: "Sink."
 Instructor: "What's this?"
 STUDENT: "Sink."

