

# Teaching the Child to Answer Questions

by  
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Many children with autism have difficulty answering questions. Parents often report that their child “knows the answers but doesn’t understand the questions!” For example, the child may be able to point to (receptive) and label (tact) colors, but when asked, “What color?”, may respond with the name (tact) of the item instead. When we teach a child to answer questions, we have to “link” types of questions with their responses. We have to be sure the child discriminates the response required for particular questions.

The child typically already has a great deal of experience with questions. Unfortunately, the most typical learning history we see is that the child has “learned” to NOT answer questions! Parents, day care providers and others typically begin asking children questions when they are very young. If the child does not know how to respond, they don’t! Those people asking the questions often don’t know how to prompt the child or teach the child to answer the question so when the child doesn’t respond, they do nothing. When reinforcement occurs after the child has not answered the question, it increases the future likelihood that the child will not answer a question the next time he is asked! For example, let’s say a child is in a daycare and the teacher asks, “What are you doing?”. If the child doesn’t know the answer, he might just ignore the teacher. A typical response to this ignoring might be that the teacher asks again, a little louder. Again, the child wouldn’t respond. The teacher might ask the question yet again, with some irritation in her voice. The child may find this interaction quite distasteful! (Aversive) Finally, the teacher might “give up” and walk away from the child. When this aversive interaction is “removed” as the teacher leaves, negative reinforcement may occur. (Taking away something aversive). This might result in the child responding the same way the next time he is asked a question. In fact, because of the child’s history of finding this “question interaction” aversive, he may attempt to avoid the situation all together. (Creates an EO for escape) So, the next time someone asks him a question he may walk away!

To avoid this type of “learning” it is best not to ask children questions to which they don’t know the answer. When questions are asked, the child should be taught to respond appropriately using transfer, prompting and correction procedures. Just as in other learning situations, we can accomplish this by using the responses the child already has and transferring them to a response to a question.

It is important to understand that questions become part of the set of stimulus conditions that specify which response will be reinforced. Because they contain controlling stimulus conditions, questions require a child to make conditional discriminations. The number of conditional discriminations required depends on the number of items present in the environment as well as the controlling stimuli involved in the question itself. For example, if a child has been taught to label (tact) objects, he is taught to respond (by being reinforced when he does so) with the object name when he hears “What” as part of the question. Later, when taught to tact actions, the child must discriminate between “What” and “What are you doing” as part of the question in order to respond correctly.

For this reason, it is suggested that instructors be careful to control the verbal stimuli (questions) used to initially teach tact responses to be sure the child is responding to the controlling stimuli present in the question. However, once discrimination has been achieved, it is also important to “loosen” the stimulus control of the question. Otherwise, the child will only be able to respond correctly if a very specific question is asked. For example, if stimulus control of the question is “too tight”, the child may be able to respond “big” if asked, “What size?” but not if asked, “What does it look like?”, “What kind?”



or “Which one?”. Or “What size is that?” Once the child is able to discriminate the controlling variables in the questions, generalization can be programmed by transferring mastered responses to new conditions and “loosening” the control of the specific question.

## Prerequisite Skills

Before beginning to work directly on teaching the child to respond to questions, he should already be able to ask for (mand) a wide variety of objects and actions. Manding (requesting) should still be the primary focus of teaching. Continue to build the number of things the child is able to ask for with a goal of 1,000 mands (requests) per day. In addition, the child should have strong skills in labeling (tacting) objects. Refer to the sections on teaching the child to mand and tact if this is not the case. If this type of teaching has occurred, the child would already be able to answer questions that serve as a stimulus for labels (tacts) for objects such as “What’s this?”, “What’s that?” and “What do we call this thing?” as well as be able to respond to the question, “What do you want/need?” when he has a desire (EO) for an item.

It should be noted however, that some children have a very difficult time learning to label (tact) items but can respond to FFC fill-ins. If this is the case, the response to the FFC fill-in can be used to “transfer” to the tact. For example, some children may not be able respond to “What’s this?” in the presence of a “cookie”, but can respond correctly when “We eat a ...” is presented in the presence of a cookie. In this case, the FFC can be transferred to the Wh? for the tact of the object.

Instructor: “We eat a ...”  
 STUDENT: “cookie”  
 Instructor: “What’s this?”  
 STUDENT: “cookie”

The important thing to remember is that the goal is to determine the conditions under which a child can respond correctly and then transfer it to a different condition.

Another important consideration is to always correct error responses by repeating the question and prompting the answer. Doing so helps insure that the child not only learns the correct response but also discriminates the question as being an important part of the stimulus conditions for the reinforcement of the correct response. For example:

Instructor: “What flies in the sky?”  
 STUDENT: “Car”  
 Instructor: “What flies in the sky? Airplane.”  
 STUDENT: “Airplane”  
 Instructor: “What flies in the sky?”  
 STUDENT: “Airplane”

Consider the alternative:

Instructor: “What flies in the sky?”  
 STUDENT: “car”  
 Instructor: “No silly. Cars drive on the road. Airplane.”  
 STUDENT: “Airplane”  
 Instructor: “That’s right!”



The child has given the “correct” response and has been reinforced but the question is “too far removed” from the event to be part of the stimulus conditions. There’s no “connection” between the question and the response and the reinforcement.

## First Questions

**\*\*AVOID YES/NO\*\*** Some types of questions are best to avoid when teaching an “early learner”. In some programs, “yes/no” questions are the first to be taught to children when in actuality, their use could inhibit language development. It has been suggested that Yes/No are sometimes taught in attempts to provide the child a way to let people know what they want. For example, the instructor might hold up a ball and ask, “Do you want the ball?” and teach the child to say “yes” if he does want the ball and “no” if he doesn’t. One concern is that the instructor may not really “know” if the child wants the item or not. If the child has been playing with the ball for a while and is reaching for the ball, an EO (desire) can be inferred; however, the child may prefer something else at the moment. The instructor really can’t be sure he/she is prompting the “correct” response.

A bigger problem arises if the child wants an item but no one has asked him! The only “behavior” taught as a response to this desire (EO) is “yes”. So, the child goes to an adult and says or shakes his head “yes”. Unfortunately, the adult has no idea what the child wants. This resulting lack of reinforcement will most likely result in the child tantrumming due to an extinction burst or the fact that the child reverts to a previously reinforced behavior in the same functional response class of “gaining objects/attention” (socially mediated positive reinforcement). A preferable way to teach the child to have his needs met is to teach him to request (mand) for individual items rather than teaching him to respond to “yes/no” questions.

**\*\*Avoid asking questions you don’t know the answer to\*\*** In general, you should avoid asking any questions about things that are not present during teaching because it may be difficult if not impossible to prompt the child. For example, if you ask the child, “What did you do at school today?” you wouldn’t be able to prompt the child to answer because you don’t know what the response should be. The child will eventually be taught to respond to questions about past events but not until after he has had a great deal of instruction in answering questions regarding things that are in the current environment. In addition, the answers will always be “known” by the instructor when teaching the child to respond to questions about past events.

**Who? (G3)** After we teach the child to label (tact) objects, we can begin teaching the child to label (tact) people. This adds another question form to teach the child. The child is taught to respond to “Who’s this?”, “Who’s that?”, “Who’s here?” etc. The discriminative part of these types of questions is the word “Who”. The child learns that when he hears “Who?”, the response should be the tact for the person. Be aware of this when teaching receptive actions in pictures. I’ve often heard instructors ask, “Who’s climbing?” as the SD for the receptive action target. The response the instructor is expecting is that the child touches the picture of the person climbing. The correct response to this should be the person’s name or a general “people tact” such as “girl” or “boy”. To help avoid later discrimination errors, make sure your question (verbal SD) matches the response you want. For example, in the example above, use “touch climbing” as the verbal SD for teaching the child to touch action pictures.

**What...doing? (G7, G8)** As we begin to teach the child to label (tact) actions, we are teaching him to respond to “What...doing?” type of questions. Again, a variety of questions that evoke the “action label” response should be taught. The child is first taught to label ongoing actions so he will learn to respond to “What are you doing?” and “What am I doing?”. Once the child masters ongoing actions, pictures can be used. This is important because you can’t “see” actual movement in pictures and that



is what we are teaching the child to label! The child can be taught to answer these types of questions by transferring from a simple instruction or request.

Transfer from simple instruction:

Instructor: "Clap"  
 STUDENT: <Claps hands and says> "clap"  
 Instructor: "What are you doing? Clapping" (full prompt because of form change)  
 STUDENT: "Clapping"  
 Instructor: "What are you doing?"  
 STUDENT: "Clapping"

Transfer from mand:

STUDENT: (wants juice and mands for action) "Pour."  
 Instructor: "What am I doing? Pouring." (full prompt because of form change)  
 STUDENT: "pouring"  
 Instructor: "What am I doing?"  
 STUDENT: "pouring"

Receptive to tact transfer

Used for children who are saying the name of the action (tacting) as they are pointing to pictures.

Instructor: "Touch eating."  
 STUDENT: <touches picture of "eating" AND says> "Eating"  
 Instructor: "What's he doing?"  
 STUDENT: "eating"

Some types of programs teach the child to label (tact) both objects and actions but do so in isolation. In other words, the child first labels a number of items then, at a separate time, labels a number of actions, both with pictures used as stimuli. When this is done, the actual question may not be serving as the stimulus for the response. Once the first question is asked, the child "knows" the type of response that is expected and really doesn't have to pay attention to the question at all!

To avoid this, different types of questions should be mixed up as soon as the child is able. For example, the instructor or parent may ask, "What's this?" and after the child responds ask, "What's he doing?" Full prompts should always be used when first teaching a response and correction procedures should always be used if the child doesn't respond. It is important to **not** always use the same pictures or objects to teach the child to tact objects and actions. Otherwise, the child may respond to the actual picture or object rather than the question. For example, if the child is always asked, "What's this?" when shown a picture of a dog in a book and asked, "What's the girl doing?" when shown the picture of a girl swinging, the stimulus to which he is responding may be the picture rather than the question. Instead, if he is playing with a dog and is asked both, "What's this called?" and "What's the dog doing?", he must "pay attention" to the question because the visual stimulus remains the same.

At this point, the child should be able to respond correctly and discriminate between "What" questions to label (tact) things, "Who" questions to label (tact) people and, "What...doing?" questions to label (tact) actions.



**Teaching the child to answer personal questions (H5)**- Some of the first questions that typically developing children learn to answer involve personal information such as their name and age. These can be taught either with echoic prompts or by transferring from receptive (pointing/touching) to labeling (tacting) responses.

Receptive to tact transfer (If child is speaking as he points)

Instructor: "Find Sam."

STUDENT: <touches picture of himself and says> "Sam"

Instructor: "What's your name?"

STUDENT: "Sam"

Once the child is able to respond correctly to the question without asking him to touch the picture first, the picture can be faded:

Instructor: "What's your name?" (picture present)

STUDENT: "Sam"

Instructor: (*hides picture*) "What's your name?"

STUDENT: "Sam"

Teaching the child to respond to "How old are you?"

Instructor: "Find 3."

STUDENT: (touches the "3" and says) "3"

Instructor: "How old are you?"

STUDENT: "3"

Fade visual stimulus- transfer to intraverbal

Instructor: "How old are you?" (number 3 present)

STUDENT: "3" (tacts number)

Instructor: (*hides 3*) "How old are you?"

STUDENT: "3"

Echoic prompts:

Instructor: "What's your name? Sam"

STUDENT: "Sam"

Instructor: "What's your name?"

STUDENT: "Sam"

Instructor: "How old are you? Three."

STUDENT: "Three."

Instructor: "How old are you?"

STUDENT: "Three."

**Answering Questions Regarding Adjectives (G13)** When reviewing the examples in the ABLLS™-R for the objective, "Labels Adjectives" the examples are all "fill-in" type of responses. However, in order to be able to label (tact) adjectives under other appropriate conditions, the child must be able to discriminate between a wide variety of question forms. The questions then, become part of the set of stimulus conditions that specifies when a particular response will be reinforced. Since the questions used to elicit specific feature responses are so similar, it's important to teach the child to discriminate the important parts (controlling variables) in the questions themselves. This can



be accomplished by beginning with short, simple questions. In addition, stressing the controlling variables (saying them louder than the other words in the question) can make them “stand out” and make it easier for the child to discriminate. It is also important to use a large variety of different objects when teaching the child to answer questions about properties (adjectives). This helps insure that the child can both discriminate and generalize the responses. Once the child learns to respond correctly with identical items that vary only in the target property, non-identical items should be introduced.

**What color? (G13)** As part of teaching a child to label colors, we have to teach him to respond to the question, “What color?” in the presence of items of color. This may seem an easy task, however, consider that both the questions used to elicit the label for objects (i.e. what is it? What’s that? What’s this called?) and the question used to elicit the label for actions (i.e. What...doing?) also contain the word “What”. Many children are able to point to (receptive) and label (tact) colors but when asked mixed questions, respond to “what color?” by giving the item name (tact of object). In addition, be aware that it is easy to “inadvertently teach” a child to say a “color”, only if the object name (tact) is contained in the verbal SD. For example, if asked, “What color is the ball?” the child may respond “red” but if only asked, “What color?” while the ball is held up, the child may respond “ball”. In this case, the child may be discriminating the presence of the object name (object tact) in the question to respond with the color rather than the more important word, “color”.

To teach the child to respond to “What color?” we must first elicit the color word by itself so we have a behavior to transfer to a new condition. Possible transfers can include:

*Mand to tact transfer* (\* Be sure the mand for the actual object is strong before teaching the child to mand with adjectives)

STUDENT: (Has an EO for the ball so mands) “Ball.”  
 Instructor: (Has a red ball and a blue ball- holds up one at a time) “Red? Blue?”  
 STUDENT: “Red.”  
 Instructor: “What color?”  
 STUDENT: “Red.”

*Receptive to tact transfer*

In order for this to be used as a transfer, the child must be saying the name (tacting) of the color at the same time he is touching. Fully prompt by pointing to the correct response as you ask the question for initial teaching.

Instructor: “Touch red”  
 STUDENT: <touches red and says> “red”  
 Instructor: “What color?”  
 STUDENT: “Red.”

*Fill-in transfer-* (used with children who are able to tact colors but not responding to “what color?” consistently)

Instructor: (*points to blue ball*) “This ball is blue.” (*points to red ball*) “This ball is...”  
 STUDENT: “Red.”  
 Instructor: “What color?”  
 STUDENT: “Red.”



It's important, especially early in teaching, that the child NOT be reinforced for giving both the color and name of the object when asked either "What color?" or "What's this?" For example, if, when shown a ball and asked, "What's this?" the child responds, "red ball", we would NOT want to reinforce. Instead, we would want to get the response, "ball". This is often difficult to remember because it can be so exciting when the child begins to combine words that we want to reinforce this longer utterance! However, it is very important to teach the child to discriminate between the different question forms. Once the child is consistently responding correctly to "What color?" we can transfer these responses to other relevant questions such as "What color is this?, What color is the ball?", etc.

**What Size? (G13)** When first teaching a child to label (tact) sizes, present two items that are identical in every way except the target size adjective.

Mand to tact transfer (\*make sure mand for object is strong before adding adjectives)

STUDENT: wants a cookie so mands "cookie"

Instructor: (*has two cookies, one big, one little- holds up each one at a time*) "Big? Little?"

STUDENT: "Big."

Instructor: "What size?"

STUDENT: "Big."

Receptive to tact transfer

The child must label size as he points. (Fully prompt with a 0 second delay during initial instruction)

Instructor: (*has a big ball and a little ball*) "Touch big."

STUDENT: <touches the big ball and says> "Big"

Instructor: "What size?"

STUDENT: "Big."

Fill-in transfer

After initial teaching, many children are able to fill-in adjective opposites. If so, this response can be used to teach the child to respond to "What size?"

Instructor: "This ball is little. This ball is ..."

STUDENT: "Big."

Instructor: "What size?"

STUDENT: "Big."

**What shape? (G13)** This question would be used to elicit the shape of items. The same teaching procedures/transfers described above can be used.

**How....feel? What...feel like? (G13)** This is a question that would be used to elicit adjectives that describe tactile sensations such as temperatures or textures (i.e. hot/cold, rough/smooth, soft/hard). These types of "feelings" can be controlled by the instructor by presenting two things that vary only in the target adjectives. For example, two identical towels, one wet and one dry, might be used to teach the child to respond "wet" or "dry" when asked "How does it feel?" The same teaching procedures/transfers described for other adjectives can be used to teach individual responses.

These questions would also be used to elicit labels (tacts) of "emotions". While many parents express a strong desire for their child to be able to tell them how they feel, this is often difficult to teach



because we don't always "know" the correct answer to prompt. Emotions are "feelings" that are private to the individual. The only way we can infer how someone is feeling is to notice the behaviors we typically associate with the feeling. For example, it's pretty easy to tell when someone is vomiting that they feel "sick" or that a person is "angry" when they're in the middle of a temper tantrum! Unfortunately, these don't make for "opportune" teaching times as it's difficult to elicit, let alone reinforce a response! When we do teach emotions, we can teach the child to respond to specific features or actions of the individual that indicate the emotion. For example, we may teach them to discriminate tears or frowns to respond "sad" and smiles or laughter to respond, "happy" when asked, "How .... feel?" type questions.

**How does it taste?** This question is often used to teach adjectives relating to taste such as "salty", "sweet", "spicy". Just as with other adjectives, providing two identical items varying only in the target should be used to teach. For example, salt and sugar look alike but vary in taste. The child should taste the item and tact the taste. Teach the child to respond to the question through transfers as described above.

**How does it smell?** This question is used to elicit adjectives relating to smell such as "stinky", "sweet", "spicy", "strong", etc. Often, adjectives of taste and smell are the same so whether the child is eating or smelling something should determine the question form used to elicit the response you want.

**What does it look like? How does it look?** These are more "general" questions that could be used to elicit a variety of responses involving features/properties that can be seen. The "correct" answer isn't specified other than the sense involved. The "correct" response might include the color, shape, size, or even parts of an object. This question is often used when teaching adjectives that don't "fit" into other grouping of size, color etc. (i.e. curved/straight, curly, narrow/wide, tall/short).

This question is also used to elicit responses that indicate one thing that has similar visual features as something else. When we teach the child to respond under these conditions we are asking for a tact of a "private" event in that we are asking the child what something looks like to them. For example, when looking at clouds, one person might tact that the cloud "looks like" a ship, while another might say that the same cloud "looks like" a bird. Both responses are "correct" in that they tact the private event of the individual. Questions such as "What does it smell/taste/feel" can also be used to teach the child to describe attributes based on their similarities to other objects.

**What kind? Which one?** These are more "general" questions that might be used to elicit a variety of adjectives. They are not as specific with regards to the response required. For example, if asked, "What kind of cookie do you want?" to elicit the use of adjectives when manding, the "correct" response could be a color, shape, flavor, type, or even a specific brand. These types of questions are often used to teach a child that "more information" or more specificity is needed to clarify their mand. For example, if 3 balloons are present, and the child mands for "balloon", an adjective is needed to specify the balloon for which he is manding.

FFCs- As we teach the child to label (tact) actions, parts of items and adjectives, we also begin to teach the child to answer questions regarding associations between and among object. In the ABLLS™-R, these are referred to as "Features, Functions, and Classes".

"Features" refers to the attributes/adjectives and/or parts of items. For example, a feature of a ball that may be taught is "round" and features of a car may include, "steering wheel", "seatbelt", "tires".



“Function” refers to what is typically done with an item. For example, a function of “ball” might include, “bounce” and a function of a car might include “ride”.

“Class” refers to the ways an item can be associated, categorized or classified with other items.

Very young children typically classify most items according to their function so for very young children or early learners the “class” and “function” target may be the same. For example, “things we ride in” and “Things we eat” are classes, but also functions.

Typically developing 4-5 year old children next learn to classify things according to categories. The first category labels that young children acquire typically include animals, foods, toys, and clothes. In addition, it is often helpful to teach “colors” as a category. This may help the child learn to discriminate “What color?” vs. “What is it?”.

## Choosing targets

Choosing targets to teach as mands, tacts and FFCs should be ideally chosen based on the interests of each individual child. The Mand is the first verbal operant taught because it is the only operant that teaches the child the “power of words”. Therefore, the first receptive, tact and FFC targets should be transferred from mastered mands.

It is acknowledged that some children have very few items or activities that are reinforcing. For these children, the main focus of the program should continue to be mand training, however, this doesn’t mean that all other operants cannot be addressed. Mand, receptive, tact and FFC targets can be chosen surrounding things in which the child comes in contact with on a daily basis. While these items may not necessarily be reinforcing in and of themselves, an EO for these items can be contrived for items needed to complete the daily tasks. For example, if the child wants to eat cereal, a spoon becomes valuable. If he wants to go outside, his shoes become valuable. If he wants to color, paper becomes valuable.

In essence, it is recommended that early FFC training only be conducted for things for which a child has manded for in the past. The instructors have a choice of “capturing” EOs such as when a child shows interest in an item or contriving EOs as described above. In addition, an attempt should be made to continually build new potential reinforcers by pairing toys and activities with items which already serve as reinforcers. These items can be primary reinforcers such as food, tickles, hugs, silly voices or other conditioned reinforcers or toys that the child has learned to enjoy.

In order to choose which FFCs to teach an individual child, it is recommended that the parents and instructors observe the child carefully to see which feature or function to which the child appears to be responding. It’s more critical that the targets chosen are those that are relevant to the child rather than one that may be judged “correct” based on semantic relationships. For example, if a child really likes to play with a bike but his favorite activity is turning the pedals, “pedals” would be an important “part” or “feature” to teach that child. Another child may like his bike but really enjoy ringing the bell. For that child, bell would be an important “part” or feature to teach. Another child may not like to ride bikes at all but may mand for other people to ride so he can watch the wheels turn. For this child “wheels” would be an important target.

Also look at the way a child responds to touching an item. If a child never chose to touch a cat, stuffed or alive, “soft” may not be a relevant feature. On the other hand, if a child tended to touch many different items, especially those items that were “soft”, it would be a relevant feature of many



different items. For children who enjoy looking at things that are long or shiny, these may be more important features of a “fork” than the fact that it has prongs.

It’s also important to keep in mind what a particular child does with an item when determining what function(s) to teach. Remember that many objects have multiple functions as well as multiple features. In fact, the ABLLS™-R objectives for intraverbal Features, Functions and Classes (H17, H8, H14 respectively) list the criteria for mastery as “20 or more fill-ins with two responses. For example, sticks may be used to poke, or twirl. Blankets can be used to hide, get warm, or make a tent. Tops can be used to spin or watch. What does the individual child like to do with the item?”

Most typically developing children learn functions before any other item. This is understandable given their relationship to the mand. If a child has manded for an item, it is reasonable that he will want to do something with it! The actions a child mands for with a given item will give you input as to what can be chosen for “function” targets.

Note that the child should also be able to classify items in more than one way. One of the first ways typically developing children learn to classify objects is based on their function. “Things we wear”, “Things we eat”, “Things we play with” are typically learned before classification by category such as “clothes”, “foods” and “toys”. In fact, for some children, once they have learned “things we eat” as a “class”, it is quite easy to transfer all responses in this response class to the class of “foods” by teaching “Things we eat are called (food).” Each individual response does not typically have to be taught again such as might be expected if you were adding a new feature or function to a target with previously mastered FFCs.

While there are many different features, functions and classes that can be chosen as targets, it is not necessary to teach all of them at one time. Choose those that are most relevant to the child’s life at the current time. More can be added as the child grows in his language usage and his ability to respond to items in a wider variety of ways. For advanced learners, we will use these features, functions and classes to transfer to teaching the child to describe and define items. When you try to think of additional targets to add, think about what you would say to someone from a foreign country who asked you to explain a “label” to them. For example, if he asked what a “cat” is, you might tell him, “It’s an animal that people have for a pet. It has whiskers and a long tail. It has claws and scratches. We pet them. It has soft fur. Dogs chase them.” From this, we could determine that “animal”, “pet” (noun), “soft”, “fur”, “whiskers”, “long tail”, “claws”, “scratch”, “pet”(verb) could all be chosen as FFC targets. If you have difficulty determining what might be appropriate, ask a typically developing child around the same age level as your child to “tell you about” or “describe” the item.

Many parents report difficulty trying to determine if a target is a feature or function. A “rule of thumb” is that if the target is a verb, it can be taught as a function. If it is a noun, it can be taught as a “part” or feature. If the target is an adjective or adverb, it can be taught as a feature. As said previously, items can be classified in a variety of ways so nouns, verbs and adjectives can all be taught as classes.

There is no “magic number” of FFCs to be taught for any specific item at one time. Even one FFC might be taught to a young child with more being taught as the child has more interaction with the item. For example, while it might be relevant for the 3 year old to learn to respond “potty” when he is asked, “What do you pee pee in?” or “What do you flush?”, it’s not so relevant that he respond “potty” in association with “bathroom fixture” or “porcelain”! For early learners, no more than 3 or 4 FFC’s should be targeted at a time. These targets should be chosen according to what’s most relevant in the child’s life rather than insisting that one function, 2 features and one class be taught for each target. Some items may have multiple functions that are relevant but no “class”. Others may have a “class”



and multiple “features” but no “function”. Avoid searching for targets to teach just so you’ll have one from each FFC grouping. (Examples of target FFCs can be found in the Sundburg and Partington manual, “*Teaching Language to Children with autism and Other Developmental Disabilities.*”

It is important that the child be able to tact the parts and adjectives involved associated with the object before including it in FFC training whenever possible in order to avoid “rote” responding. It is much easier to be sure the child is discriminating the correct part of the question if the labels (tacts) of the parts and adjectives are taught first. For example, the child should be able to at least receptively identify and ideally label (tact) “whiskers, fur, tail, soft” on a cat before using these features in FFC training for “cat”.

The questions used to elicit the label of parts (tact parts) are the same as tacting objects so additional conditional discriminations are not required on the part of the child. He just labels (tacts) what is pointed to or indicated in the presence of “What’s that?” or a similar SD. Transfer procedures used for teaching tacts of objects can be used. It should be noted, however, that others using the ABLLS™-R curriculum do not think it is necessary to provide this pre-requisite teaching before the target is chosen as for FFC teaching as long as they (parts/adjectives) are taught at some point.

You will find ABLLS™-R objectives related to the teaching of FFCs in the receptive, labeling (tacting) and intraverbal sections; however, these skills are typically taught at the same time. When one skill is used to teach another it is referred to as a “transfer”.

RECEPTIVE (Item present)	TACT (Item present)	INTRAVERBAL (Item NOT present)
C37: Select by Function <i>EX: Touch the one we eat</i>	G15: Label when given function <i>EX: What do we eat?</i>	H6: Fill-in words describing common activities <i>EX: We sleep in a...</i> H8: Fill-in item given function <i>EX: We eat a .....</i> H11: Answers “What” questions <i>EX: What’s something we eat?</i>
C38 Select by Feature <i>EX: Find the one with chocolate chips</i>	G16 Label when given feature <i>EX: Which one is food?</i>	H10: Fill-in item given feature <i>EX: Something with a chocolate chips is a ...</i>
C39 Select by class <i>EX: Touch the food</i>	G17 Label item given class <i>EX: Which one is food?</i>	H14: Fills in item given class <i>EX: A kind of food is a</i>
	G24 Labels function of item <i>EX: What do we do with a cup?</i>	H9: Fill-in function given item <i>EX: We use a cup to ....</i>
	G25 Labels Class of object <i>EX: What’s a dog? (animal)</i>	H18: Fill-in class given item <i>EX: A dog is an.....</i>
	G12 Labels parts/features of objects <i>EX: What does an elephant have?</i>	H16: Fill-in feature given item <i>EX: An elephant has... (tusks/trunk)</i>
	G13 Labels Adjectives <i>EX: What size is an elephant?</i>	H16: Fill-in feature given item <i>EX: An elephant is....(big)</i>

When beginning FFC teaching, start with what the child can already do successfully. Determine a response the child has already mastered and transfer this response to a new condition. You may want to teach fill-in responses first then transfer these responses to questions once the fill-ins are mastered. This is because the fill-in has no “required response”. If the child does not fill-in the target



word, the instructor does so. If fill-ins have been used to elicit mands in the past, the child may have responded to the FFC many times when manding so the fill-in may be very easy to elicit as a tact. For example, if, when teaching the child to mand for “bubbles” the instructor frequently said “Blow bubbles, Blow...” and the child responded “bubbles” (which was then reinforced by getting bubbles), it would be easy to teach the child to use the same response even when he didn’t want the bubbles. The only variable that would be different would be the child’s EO (motivation) for the bubbles themselves.

The following are examples of transfer procedures to use when teaching the child to respond to questions containing features, functions and classes:

Receptive to RFFC transfer

**What if the child can point to an item when I say its name but is unable to respond to a question about the item?** Some people choose to teach FFC’s beginning with the receptive response. In this case, the receptive object response can be transferred to the RFFC. In the natural environment, it is easy to contrive situations requiring the child to respond receptively to an FFC. For example, if you get wet, ask the child to “get something to dry with”. Or, pretend you’re thirsty and ask the child to “get something to drink”. To teach, start with a mastered response such as touching the item when hearing it’s “name”.

Instructor: “Touch the towel.”  
 STUDENT: <touches towel>  
 Instructor: “Which one do we dry off with?”  
 STUDENT: <touches the towel>

In this case, the child would be more likely to touch the towel again because he just did so. An alternative teaching procedure would be to fully prompt the response to the FFC by touching the object/picture at the same time the question is asked (0 second delay prompt)

Instructor: “Which one do we dry off with?” (*touches the towel at the same time*)  
 STUDENT: <touches towel>  
 Instructor: “Which one do we dry off with?” (no prompt)  
 STUDENT: <touches towel>

Tact to TFFC Transfer - (For children who label (tact) objects but do not respond to questions.)

The tact response can be transferred to the TFFC (tact by feature, function or class)

Instructor: “What’s this?”  
 STUDENT: “Blanket.”  
 Instructor: “What do we cover up with?”  
 STUDENT: “Blanket.”

Fill-in to TFFC transfer- (For children who respond well to “fill-in” tasks)

Instructor: “We cover up with a blanket. We cover up with a....”  
 STUDENT: “Blanket.”

Fill-in to WH? Question transfer (item still present- TFFC) For children who are able to fill-in the label (tact) but not respond to WH questions.



Instructor: "We cover up with a ..."  
 STUDENT: "blanket."  
 Instructor: "What do we cover up with?"  
 STUDENT: "blanket."

*RFFC to TFFC Transfer* – (For children who say the name (tact) of objects as they point.)

The receptive/tact combination can be transferred to a response to a TFFC. The important thing is that the CHILD'S response is the one you are trying to teach under a new condition. If the child does not say the name of the item at the same time he touches it, you do not have a response to transfer to the new condition.

Instructor: (a cat or a picture of a cat remains present) "Touch the one with whiskers."  
 STUDENT: <touches cat AND says> "cat"  
 Instructor: "What's something with whiskers?"  
 STUDENT: "Cat" (tact when given feature/part)

*Transfer to Intraverbal* - What if the child is able to label (tact) the item when I ask a question but can't respond when the item is not present? Many children with autism can answer questions when the item is present but are unable to respond when it is not. For most children, it is necessary to gradually fade the item (visual stimulus) from view so the child can learn to answer (respond) just based on the question (verbal stimulus of someone else).

*Tact to Intraverbal transfer*

Instructor: (*blanket present*) "What do we cover up with?"  
 STUDENT: "Blanket"  
 Instructor: (*puts blanket behind her back*) "What do we cover up with?"  
 STUDENT: "Blanket."

*Fill-in to Intraverbal Transfer*

Instructor: (blanket not present) "We cover up with a ..."  
 STUDENT: "blanket."  
 Instructor: "What do we cover up with?"  
 STUDENT: "Blanket"

*Echoic to Intraverbal Transfer*

Instructor: Say, "car"  
 STUDENT: "Car."  
 Instructor: "What do we ride in?"  
 STUDENT: "Car."

## Where?

Responses to "Where" questions can be transferred from many mastered FFC "Reversal" questions or fill-ins.

Instructor: "A fish lives ..."  
 STUDENT: "in the water."  
 Instructor: "Where does a fish live?"  
 STUDENT: "In the water."



It is easy to teach the child to respond to “Where” questions by first teaching them to mand for information using “Where?”

Mand to tact transfer

Instructor: “I have a cookie for you. Say, ‘Where’s the cookie?’ “  
 STUDENT: “Where’s the cookie?”  
 Instructor: “In the box.” (*takes out and gives child cookie*)

When this step is mastered (i.e. child no longer requires prompting and mands for information frequently), add the tact of the location to the demand.

Instructor: “I have a cookie.”  
 STUDENT: “Where’s the cookie?”  
 Instructor: “In the box.” (*shows child cookie in the box then asks*) “Where’s the cookie?”  
 STUDENT: “In the box. Can I have the cookie?”  
 Instructor: “Sure! Take it out of the box.”

The child also learns to respond to “Where” questions when he learns to label (tact) prepositions.

Receptive to Tact transfer - For child who tacts as they follow receptive instructions

Instructor: “Put the shoe in the box” (receptive)  
 STUDENT: <Puts shoe in the box and says> “In the box”  
 Instructor: “Where is the shoe?”  
 STUDENT: “In the box”

(*2 bowls present one with an apple under it and one with an apple on it*)

Instructor: “Show me ‘under the bowl’” (0 second delay for initial teaching)  
 STUDENT: (says) “under the bowl” (and points to the correct apple)  
 Instructor: “Where’s the apple?”  
 STUDENT: “Under the bowl.”

### Who / Whose?

The child first learns to respond to “Who” questions when learning to tact people. Another one of the conditions that would require a child to respond to “who” questions is when teaching FFCs about specific community helpers or family members.

Instructor: “Who tucks you in bed?”  
 STUDENT: “Mommy”

Instructor: “Who’s this?” (picture of firefighter is present and child is able to tact firefighter)  
 STUDENT: “Firefighter”  
 Instructor: “Who puts out fires?”  
 STUDENT: “Firefighter”

Responding to “Whose” questions is required to teach possessive pronouns such as “His, her, mine, my, your” etc.

Instructor: “Say ‘My turn’”



STUDENT: "My turn."  
 Instructor: "Whose turn is it?"  
 STUDENT: "My turn."

This response can also be taught by first teaching the child to mand for information using "whose".

Instructor: (puts a piece of candy on the table) "Say, 'Whose candy?'"  
 STUDENT: "Whose candy?"  
 Instructor: "It's yours! Here, take it."

Later, when the child is manding with "Whose" consistently with no prompting, add the tact of the possessive.

(piece of candy on the table)  
 STUDENT: "Whose candy?"  
 Instructor: "It's Daddy's. The candy is ..."  
 STUDENT: "Daddy's."  
 Instructor: "Whose candy?"  
 STUDENT: "Daddy's"

Responses to "Whose" questions can also be taught using "contingent comments". The child is taught to tact a similar, but not exact event.

Instructor: (child and instructor both have crayons) "My crayon is blue."  
 STUDENT: "My crayon is red."  
 Instructor: "Whose crayon is red?"  
 STUDENT: "My crayon/mine."

## Which?

The child first begins to respond to "Which" questions when tacts of adjectives and FFCs are taught.

Instructor: "Which one is big?"  
 STUDENT: (touches the big item)

Instructor: "Which one flies?" (bird, kangaroo, ball are present)  
 STUDENT: Touches/says "bird"

This response can be transferred to teach the child to respond to intraverbal "Which" questions as described in the ABLLS™-R

Instructor: "Which one flies? A bird, a kangaroo or a ball?" (*touches each picture while asking*)  
 STUDENT: "Bird."  
 Instructor: (takes pictures away) "Which one flies? A bird, a kangaroo or a ball?"  
 STUDENT: "Bird."

## When?

The first responses children learn to "when" questions are typically general "time" concepts such as "in the morning", "at night". Later, as they learn more time and sequence concepts, these are also "tested" using "when" questions.



Instructor: "We sleep at night. We sleep..."  
 STUDENT: "at night."

Once fill-in is given without the prompt needed...

Instructor: "We sleep at..."  
 STUDENT: "night."  
 Instructor: "When do we sleep?"  
 STUDENT: "night."

## How?

Some "how" questions can be transferred from FFCs.

Instructor: "You go to school on a ..."  
 STUDENT: "bus."  
 Instructor: "How do you get to school?"  
 STUDENT: "bus"

Responses to "How" questions can also be taught by first teaching the child to mand for information using "how".

*(Instructor shows the child a spinning top for which he has an EO, then hands it to him)*  
 Instructor: "How do you make it go?"  
 STUDENT: "How do you make it go?"  
 Instructor: "You put this stick in here and pull." (helps child if needed so reinforcement occurs)

After the child is manding for information using "how" consistently with no prompting needed, add the tact to the demand.

STUDENT: "How do you turn this on?"  
 Instructor: "Push the little white button." *(maintains control over toy)*  
 Instructor: "How do you turn this on?"  
 STUDENT: "Push the little white button."

The child also learns to respond to "How" questions as he learns to tact the sequence of a specific activity. For example, once the child is able to tact all the "steps" in making a sandwich, these responses can be transferred to responding to, "How do you make a sandwich?"

As discussed earlier, children also learn to respond to "How" questions when learning to tact adjectives.

## Why?

One way to teach the child to respond to "why" questions is to "lead them" to the correct response.

Instructor: *(looking at a book with the child)* "Look at that boy. He's yawning. How does he feel?"  
 STUDENT: "He feels tired."  
 Instructor: "He went to bed! Why did he go to bed?"  
 STUDENT: "He feels tired."

Instructor: *(looking at a book with the child)* "What's happening here?"  
 STUDENT: "The girl's walking into the barn."



Instructor: "That's right! What did she do in the barn?"

STUDENT: "Get the horse."

Instructor: "Why did she go in the barn?"

STUDENT: "To get the horse."

As we teach the child to answer these questions in isolation, it's also important to begin teaching him to respond to multiple different questions about a single item or event. (Verbal Module) This is important because some children with autism have difficulty responding to multiple "cues" within a given item (stimulus). In order to respond in this manner, the child must have the specific question (verbal stimulus) strongly paired with the specific response. As you teach these different types of labels (tacts), it is important to look out for any difficulty the child has in responding to the questions. For example, the child may be taught to respond to "What color?" correctly but when asked, "What color?" mixed with "What size?" may incorrectly respond by saying the size when asked, "What color?" and the color when asked, "What size?".

Many people determine that a child has not "mastered" or "generalized" a specific skill because they ask the same question in a different context but don't realize that they've added some complexity to the task by requiring more discriminations. For this reason, it is important to actually teach the child which words in the question actually serve as the discriminative stimuli (SD) for each response class. As we continue to use "What?" as part of our question (SD) the child has to "attend to" or respond to a second "word"(verbal stimulus) in the question. The child is required to make conditional discriminations based on the particular question. Consider the following examples that may be used as SDs when teaching a child to label actions, adjectives and parts of an item. Just because the child is able to answer these questions in isolation, it doesn't mean he will necessarily be successful in responding to all the different questions about the same item, especially if there are other items present requiring even more discrimination. In this case, let's assume there are other toy vehicles also present but only one doll, "daddy". The verbal discriminative stimuli or elements requiring conditional discrimination are bold:

<b>What</b> is this called?	R= car (tact object)
<b>Who</b> is this?	R= daddy (tact person)
<b>What</b> is daddy <b>doing</b> ?	R= driving (tact action)
	(Note that if another person was present, "daddy" would also be important)
<b>What color</b> is the <b>car</b> ?	R= blue (tact adjective)
<b>What</b> does the <b>car have</b> ?	R= steering wheel, tires, wipers, seat belt etc. (tact parts)
<b>What size</b> is the <b>car</b> ?	R= big (tact adjective)
<b>What</b> do we <b>ride in</b> ?	R= car
<b>Whose car</b> is this?	R= daddy's
<b>Who's driving</b> the <b>car</b> ?	R= daddy
<b>What</b> do we <b>do with</b> a <b>car</b> ?	R = drive, ride
<b>Where</b> do <b>cars go</b> ?	R= on the road
<b>Who fixes cars</b> ?	R= mechanic
<b>How</b> do we <b>start</b> the <b>car</b> ?	R= key
<b>What</b> do we <b>wear</b> in the <b>car</b> ?	R= seatbelt
<b>Why</b> do we <b>wear seatbelts</b> ?	R= to keep safe/protect us

As you can see, the more a child learns about a given item, the more conditional discriminations he must make to be able to respond correctly to all the different questions concerning the item. Make sure that many, many transfer trials are run for the different questions and be aware of any discrimination errors that may be occurring. For example, if the child responded "on the road" when asked, "What do we wear in the car?" one could see that he was not discriminating "Where" as a



“location” and “wear” as an “action”. Nor was he responding to the missing word “go” as part of the question. Teaching opportunities could be contrived to teach the child to discriminate these specific questions. Keep the child successful!

Remember that when playing and interacting with a child, it is important not to begin “drilling” questions at him one after another. Questions should be gradually mixed in with other types of responses during play. The interaction should remain enjoyable to the child! If you find the child anxious to leave the situation (escape) then it may be an indication that you’re asking too many questions! If this is the case, back off and do more fill-ins, receptive and imitative responses during the play.

