

# Teaching the Child to Ask Questions

by  
Tracy Vail, MS, CCC/SLP

## ***Pre-requisite Skills***

The child should be requesting (manding) a large number of objects and actions. Some people prefer to wait until the child is also able to label (tact) adjectives and prepositions as well as waiting until the child is using sentences to request (mand). Others have had success with using the teaching procedures involved in teaching the child to ask questions (mands for information) to teach the child prepositions and adjectives because doing so may increase the child's motivation (EO) for using the adjectives and prepositions in a functional manner. It is probably most important to determine the child's ability to discriminate the conditions under which questions (mands for information) are appropriate and then use whichever sequence of teaching skills the individual child responds to best. If it is decided to teach the child to ask questions and discrimination errors begin to occur, try to teach the child to discriminate the relevant context. If you are unsuccessful, hold off on teaching the child to ask questions (mands for information) while other necessary skills are taught.

## ***Why do People Ask Questions?***

The primary function of asking questions is to obtain desired information. Of course, as adults, we have also learned that it's polite and reinforcing to our friends to ask certain questions (i.e. "How are you doing?" "How was your vacation?"). If we are interested and enjoy (are reinforced by) our interactions with the person we are talking to or the topic of discussion, the questions serve to maintain or continue the conversation.

When typically developing children are first learning to ask questions "dat?" is often the first question used. One explanation of this behavior is that the child is requesting information. The child wants to learn and is interested in the environment. If this is the case, then in behavioral terms it means that words have become reinforcing to the child. Another behavioral explanation may be that the person the child is saying "dat?" in the presence of has become a conditioned reinforcer and the child is requesting ("manding" for) the attention of the person. This happens after a long learning history of that person being paired with reinforcement and reinforcement occurring whenever the child says "dat?" in the presence of the person.

## ***Is my child/student already requesting information?***

Remember that when determining the maintaining reinforcer for any given behavior, we have to look at what the specific child enjoys. Children might appear to be "manding for information" by pointing to, or touching an object/picture without looking at the adult present. This behavior has a history of being reinforced (maintained) by the adult present saying the name of the item touched.

For example, one child was highly reinforced by letters or numbers and pointed to them frequently. Whenever the child pointed, the adult said the name of the letter or number. The child could receptively identify (touch/get/point) to the letters and numbers when asked but was non-verbal. His only way of manding for objects was to pull his parents to the desired object or typical location of the activity he desired. Rather than "manding for information" the parents had become the child's personal "V-Tech" toy! (One of his favorite "stimmy toys.") While this did serve to pair the parents with reinforcement which is a desirable goal in and of itself, we wouldn't want to do this in exclusion of teaching the child how to request specific objects or actions using other forms of communication.

For this particular child, we were successful in teaching a couple of skills with the behaviors he was already exhibiting (touching) and using his desire (EO) to hear someone say letters and numbers. First, we began the activity in the way the child had been previously taught (child points/adult says).



Then we started waiting a few seconds until the child turned and looked at the adult before saying the name of the number. Soon the child was making eye contact as he pointed. Next, we wrote the numbers on small cards and taught the child to hand us the number he wanted us to say (Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)). We taught the child the skill of giving someone a picture of what he wanted to obtain what he wants (reinforcer). Later, when not specifically engaged in the activity, the child would take the picture to the parent. When he did so, the parent got out the letters/numbers, and played with the child using them. This skill was more functional because the child could request the specific game or activity using the picture whereas before he was only able to request a specific behavior of his parents if the letters or numbers were present. The child also generalized this skill (PECS) to requesting other toys, foods and activities that he desired. We also used the reinforcing value of letters paired with blocks, puzzles and songs to pair those activities with reinforcement (create new conditioned reinforcers).

It's also important to recognize that even if the child is saying words that sound like questions, we have to determine the reinforcer that's maintaining before we can determine if the child is requesting information or requesting a specific object or activity. For example, a highly echoic child might ask, "Do you want to watch TV?" when he doesn't really care much if YOU want to or not! The function of this question is to communicate, "I want to watch TV". It's easy to see how this might happen. The "learning history" in this case might be that whenever the child wants to (has an EO) for watching TV, he drags is mom to the television set and puts her hand on the button. Right before turning on the TV she asks her child, "Do you want to watch TV?" The child echoes, "Do you want to watch TV?" and the TV is turned on. The behavior of saying "Do you want to watch TV" has been reinforced multiple times. The problem is, the child is using the incorrect "form" for the function! Instead, the parent was taught to prompt with "I want to watch...". The child filled in "TV", and then the TV was turned on. The child was not yet echoing isolated words under "instructional control" or on a consistent basis but he typically filled-in words from his favorite songs so we knew this would be a more successful way of getting the "behavior" of saying "TV" so we could reinforce it. In this case, we didn't want to prompt the child to say, "I want to watch TV" until we taught him to use isolated words for a variety of functions because of his strong echoic history. We did eventually prompt him to use many different sentences, (i.e. "I want to watch TV", "Turn on the TV", "Let's watch some TV" etc.) to get the TV on but only after he was able to label a large number of items in response to "What's this?" and was also doing so spontaneously to gain our attention. Using the sentence, "I want to watch TV", was then important because the listener could not always determine if he said the word because he wanted it or was just labeling it to get our attention.

Other children often ask questions that are not serving the purpose of gaining information. For example, they may ask, "Where's my ball?" when the ball is sitting in front of them. This often happens because the child has been reinforced for saying the words that sound like questions by receiving the desired item, even when it's visible. Or, the child may have been taught to ask questions through imitative activities that did not include the appropriate reinforcer (getting information you don't know). For example, perhaps the child was reinforced for saying "Who's that?" while looking at pictures of familiar family members in a photo album. If the child can label (tact) the people in the album he doesn't need the information that "Who's that?" should be used to obtain. Whenever this type of learning history has occurred, it is best to prompt the correct words to use in the context and then reinforce, providing multiple opportunities to practice and fading prompts and at the same time, teach the appropriate conditions so the child is able to discriminate between the two. For example, for the child above, one might prompt (echoic and putting child's finger on the picture), "Look, there's daddy!", "That's grandma!" etc. and fade the prompts. At the same time, teach him to ask "Who" questions under the condition that he needs the information as described below.



**How do I teach the child to ask questions under the appropriate conditions?**

First, consider the “information” that would reinforce the specific question form:

1. “Can” obtains information about the ability of an object or person to engage in a specific activity. The response is typically “yes” or “no”. Example:

*“Can donkeys fly?”*

2. “Can I” / “May I” obtains permission to engage in a desired activity or get a desired object. (While it’s “grammatically incorrect” to use “can” under this condition, it is so widely used in our society for this function that it is considered appropriate so long as the family commonly uses the question form under this condition.) Example:

*“Can I go outside?”*

*“May I have a cookie?”*

3. “Will” / “Would” / “Could” / “Would you mind?” obtains information about the ability, willingness or likelihood of another person engaging in a specific activity. (combined with “you” if you’re talking to the person you want to engage in the activity, “he, she” if the person is present but you’re not talking to them and the specific name of the person if the person is not present.)

Example:

*“Will Grandma pick me up?”*

*“Would you help me with this puzzle?”*

*“Could you get my shoes?”*

*“Would you mind taking out the garbage?”*

*“Will he take my truck?”*

*“Will Daddy go to work today?”*

*“Would Mrs. Smith take me to the park with her?”*

4. “What / What’s that?” obtains information about the label (tact) of an object. Example:

*“What’s in the bag?”*

*“What’s that?” (pointing to an unknown object/picture) )*

5. “What kind?” obtains information specific to an attribute of an object or indicates more “specificity” is required. Example:

*Instructor: “I got a new dog!”*

*STUDENT: “What kind?”*

*Instructor: “A Boxer.”*

*“What kind of chips do you want?”*

6. “Who?” obtains information about the label (tact) of a person. Example:

*“Who’s that?” (new kid in class)      “Who took my truck?”*

*Mom: “Someone’s coming over today!”*

*STUDENT: “Who?”*



7. “Where?” obtains information regarding the location of an object, person, or activity.

Example:

*“Where’s mommy?” (mommy not present)*

*“Where are my shoes?” (shoes not present)*

*“Where are we going?”*

8. “When?” obtains information regarding some measurement of time. Example

*“When can I have lunch?”*

*“When are you leaving for vacation?”*

*“When can we get together?”*

9. “Why?” obtains information about the reason something is occurring or has occurred.

Example:

*“Why are you wearing a purse on your head?”*

*“Why did you hit me?”*

*“Why is he talking so loud?”*

10. “Which one?” obtains clarification about two or more items. Example:

*Dad: “Can I have a cookie?” (3 present)*

*STUDENT: “Which one?”*

11. “How?” obtains information about a procedure or process of completing something.

Example:

*“How do you open this?”*

*“How does this work?”*

12. “Do / Did / Does?” Combined with pronouns or specific names to obtain information about preferences, common activities or past events. Example:

*“Did you get some crackers?”*

*“Do you like puzzles?”*

*“Does grandma like Thomas videos?”*

The next step is to determine how we can make receiving the information valuable (reinforcing) to the child. This is an important element of the teaching process because, while we can teach a child to “ask” questions, if the child is not reinforced by the information received, it is unlikely that he will engage in this behavior spontaneously! In other words, we can teach him to ask but we also must teach him to “care about” getting the information. This can be done by pairing the receipt of the information with an established reinforcer. Once getting information has a long history or being paired with reinforcement, the likelihood that future questions will be asked is increased. The author typically teaches single “question words” at first to be sure they are taught as the “important word” (discriminative stimulus) for a specific response or specific type of information. Then, multiple questions containing each specific question form can be taught. Example teaching procedures are as follows:



**What?**

*(“Thomas” books are highly reinforcing to the child and are out of sight)*

Instructor: “I have something for you! Say, ‘What?’”

STUDENT: “What?”

Instructor: “A new Thomas book!”

(Note: The child should already have been taught to respond by echoing whatever follows “say” in an instruction. If the child has difficulty discriminating the requirement of the “echoic” response from responding to the question itself, it is often helpful to have them echo some others words first to “build momentum” then the question word. Ex:

Instructor: “Say ‘house’”

STUDENT: “house”

Instructor: “Say ‘baby’.”

STUDENT: “baby”

Instructor: “Say ‘what’.”

STUDENT: “What”

*(Reinforcing item is placed in an opaque bag)*

Instructor: (points to the bag) “Say, ‘What’s that?’”

STUDENT: ” What’s that?”

Instructor: “It’s your top! Come on, let’s play!”

*(Child is reaching toward zipped up bag containing a reinforcer)*

Instructor: “Say, ‘What’s in the bag?’”

STUDENT: “What’s in the bag?”

Instructor: “A new video for us to watch! Come on!”

Once the question has been paired with reinforcement sufficiently, teach the child to ask for information regarding labels (tacts) he does not know.

Instructor: *(looking at a book about Sea Animals containing many tacts the child has previously acquired but some he has not yet been taught.)*

Instructor: “What’s that?”

STUDENT: “whale”

Instructor: *(Points to other animals the child knows but doesn’t ask “What’s that?” to fade the question prompt for the labels (tacts).*

STUDENT: “Shark Octopus “

Instructor: *(Points to an unknown item and immediately prompts), “Say ‘What’s that?’”*

STUDENT: “What’s that?”

Instructor: “It’s a sea lion.” *(Depending on the particular child, the reinforcement for engaging in this behavior (i.e. asking the question) might be receiving the information (if he enjoys sea animals) or can be paired with social reinforcement such as “Wow! You’re learning lots of sea animals!”*

Social praise has become a conditioned reinforcer or can be paired with a decrease in demands (just reading and enjoying the rest of the book together), or another reinforcer (such as getting a toy sea lion to give him after he asks the question if he enjoys playing with sea creatures).



**Who?**

*(Planned arrival of a number of people who have been paired with reinforcement)*

Instructor: "Someone's at the door! Say, 'Who'"

STUDENT: "Who"

Instructor: (opens the door) "It's grandma!" *(repeat with other "favorite" people)*

*(Have different people take turns hiding under a blanket/sheet, out of view of child)*

Instructor: "Look! There's someone under the blanket! Say, 'Who?'"

STUDENT: "Who?"

Instructor: (Says the name of the person as they "pop out" from under the blanket.)

Instructor: "Somebody likes to give you kisses! Say, 'Who?'"

STUDENT: "Who?"

Instructor: "Me!" (shows the child with kisses)

*(arrange for reinforcing people to call on the phone)*

Instructor: "There's someone on the phone for you! Say, 'Who is it?'"

STUDENT: "Who is it?"

Instructor: "It's Daddy! Daddy wants to talk to you!"

*(looking through photo album)*

Instructor: "Who's that?"

STUDENT: "Mommy."

Instructor: (Continues pointing to pictures then points to someone the child doesn't know)

Instructor: "Say, 'Who's that?'"

STUDENT: "Who's that?"

Instructor: "Bill." (also provide social or tangible reinforcement for asking the question.)

**Where?**

*(Woody is a strong reinforcer)*

Instructor: "I know where Woody is! Say, 'Where?'"

STUDENT: "Where?"

Instructor: "He's under the couch!" (helps child locate if necessary)

Once "what" is mastered, combine with "Where".

Instructor: "I have something for you!"

STUDENT: "What is it?"

Instructor: "A new ball! Say, 'Where is it?'"

STUDENT: "Where is it?"

Instructor: "It's in this bag!"

STUDENT: (gets ball out)

Once the child is manding "Where" in contrived situations appropriately in response to specific SDs, teach him to mand "Where" combined with the object label to request missing items.



*(playing with ball castle- Instructor hides the ball in different locations around the room)*

Instructor: *(calls attention to empty basket where the ball is usually kept)*

Instructor: Say, 'Where's the ball?'"

STUDENT: "Where's the ball?"

Instructor: "It's under the box."

*(Give cereal without a spoon.)*

Instructor: "Say, 'Where's my spoon?'"

STUDENT: "Where's my spoon?"

Instructor: "It's in the drawer. Let's go get it!"

(The child should be consistently manding for missing items. Be sure to continue reinforcing the mand for the item (i.e. I need a spoon) intermittently. It may be necessary to also hide a primary reinforcer with the spoon to make up for the delayed reinforcement to getting the spoon.)

### Why?

*(Instructor and child working on a "non-preferred" activity)*

Instructor: "We have to stop working now. Say, 'Why'"

STUDENT: "Why?"

Instructor: "Because we're going to the park!" (a highly preferred activity)

*(child watching a "less preferred" video. Instructor comes in and turns it off)*

Instructor: "Say, 'Why did you turn off the video?'"

STUDENT: "Why did you turn off the video?"

Instructor: "So we can watch this new Dora video!" (a "more preferred video)

*(instructor wears a clown nose into session)*

Instructor: "Say, 'Why are you wearing that nose?'"

STUDENT: "Why are you wearing that nose?"

Instructor: "Because we're going to play with the circus today!" (one of child's favorite activities)

### Which/ Which One?

Instructor: "One of these candies is for you! Say, 'Which One?'"

STUDENT: "Which one?"

Instructor: "The orange candy.' (child's favorite color)

Instructor: *(holding out two hands, fist)* "I have a piece of candy in my hand! Say, 'Which one?'"

STUDENT: "Which one?"

Instructor: "This one!" (opens hand and gives candy to child)

(Can also teach the child to mand specifically for "Which hand?")

*(two boxes present- One containing Woody)*

Instructor: "Woody is in a box. Say, 'Which box?'"

STUDENT: "Which box?"

Instructor: "The shiny box."

Once he's using the question form consistently; teach him to mand for information to clarify a request.



Instructor: *(Two balloons present)* "Hand me a balloon. Say, 'Which one?'"  
 STUDENT: "Which one?"  
 Instructor: "The long one."  
 STUDENT: *(Gives balloon to instructor and instructor blows it up and plays with the child.)*

When child has mastered asking "What?" and "Where?" questions, combine with "Which one?"

Instructor: "I have something for you!"  
 STUDENT: "What?"  
 Instructor: "A squishy ball!"  
 STUDENT: "Where is it?"  
 Instructor: "In the bag. (2 bags present) Say, 'Which one?'"  
 STUDENT: "Which one?"  
 Instructor: "The large bag."

### Whose?

Instructor: "I have someone's candy! Say 'Whose?'"  
 STUDENT: "Whose?"  
 Instructor: "It's yours!" *(gives the candy)*

Instructor: *(Lays candy in front of child)* "Say, 'Whose candy?'"  
 STUDENT: "Whose candy?"  
 Instructor: "It's yours!"

Once the child is regularly asking "Whose?" with no prompting, mix in trials that the candy belongs to someone else intermittently.

*(candy laying in front of child)*  
 STUDENT: "Whose candy?"  
 Instructor: "It's Mommy's." *(Mommy takes the candy)*

### When?

STUDENT: "Can I have a cookie?"  
 Instructor: "Not right now. Say, 'When'"  
 STUDENT: "When?"  
 Instructor: "As soon as we wash our hands!" *(Make sure initial "waiting time" is very short!)*

Instructor: "We're going to the park! Say, 'When?'"  
 STUDENT: "When?"  
 Instructor: "As soon as we finish this book!"

After "Where" questions are mastered, mix in "When".

Instructor: "We're going someplace special today!"  
 STUDENT: "Where are we going?"  
 Instructor: "To the zoo! Say, 'When are we going to the zoo?'"  
 STUDENT: "When are we going to the zoo?" *(child's favorite place)*  
 Instructor: "Right after lunch!" *(Do this while you're eating lunch, not right after breakfast!)*



**How?**

Instructor: *(has a new toy that is hard to run)* "I know how to turn this on. Say 'How?'"

STUDENT: "How?"

Instructor: "Like this!" *(Turn on but hide the "secret" from the child so you can get a few trials in!)*

After no prompting is needed, just prompt the child to say, "How do you turn it on?", and demonstrate.

Instructor: *(Has a container with a new fastener and a reinforcer inside. Gives container to child.)* Instructor: "Say, 'How do you open it?'"

STUDENT: "How do you open it?"

Instructor: "You have to turn it this way." *(opens and gives child the reinforcer.)*

**Can**

*(Child enjoys watching the instructor do silly things and regularly gives "contingent comments" with no prompting.)*

Instructor: "Let's play a game! Can you do this?" *(does something silly for child to imitate)*

STUDENT: "Yes I can!" *(Imitates)*

Instructor: "That's silly! Now it's your turn."

STUDENT: "Can you do this?" *(performs a silly behavior for instructor to imitate)*

Instructor: "Yes, I can!" (Or, "No, I can't!" if appropriate!)

**Do / Does**

Instructor: "We can go outside if everyone wants to. Say, 'Do you want to go outside?'"  
*(directing child to ask another child in the group of 3.)*

STUDENT: "Do you want to go outside?" *(continue with other children, hoping all will say yes!)*

Instructor: "You can play ball if you find someone to play with. Say, 'Do you want to play ball?'"

*(directing the child to approach another person)*

STUDENT: "Do you want to play ball?" *(continue until you find someone that says, "yes")*

These are just examples of the many activities that can be used to teach the child to ask questions. The important things to remember are:

- 1) The information should not be known
- 2) The information should be "valuable" to the child.

