

Teaching the Child to Request (Mand)

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Once you have established a variety of things the child is interested in (reinforcers) and have paired yourself with these reinforcers (conditioned reinforcer), teach him to ask for the item or activity. There are many different ways to do this based on both the current skills of the child and the way the child reacts to various things in the environment (stimuli). Remember to use your “teaching reasoning”. Ask yourself, “How can I get the child to produce the response I want?” Then, determine how you can transfer that response to the new condition.

The important thing to remember is that the ultimate goal is to teach children to communicate vocally. Many parents are hesitant to use any alternative or augmentative communication (AAC) because they are afraid that it means they are giving up on teaching the child to talk. This is definitely not the case. There is a great deal of research indicating that teaching a child to use an AAC system to request (mand) actually increases the likelihood that they will develop vocal speech. In addition, even if an augmentative system is used to teach the child to request, there are many things that should be occurring in a child’s program to increase his ability to produce speech. Use of AAC gives the child a way to communicate as the vocal skills are being taught.

The most important thing to consider is that teaching the child to request using any form teaches him that communication is powerful. It allows him access to things he wants and can replace many negative behaviors the child may currently be using to communicate. It allows him to receive reinforcing items from people, which in turn, makes people more reinforcing to the child. Finally, it gives the child a skill that we can later transfer to many other functions of language.

There are pros and cons to each response form but the decision on which to use should be based on the individual child as well as the environment in which he spends most of his time. There are a variety of different systems claimed to be “the best choice” by different professionals but the “best” choice or choices are those that are best suited to the individual child and the environment he is in on a day to day basis. The decision on which form to use can often best be determined by a team of people who are familiar with the child and should not be based primarily on the skills of the instructor or the program the child is involved in. Of course these factors must be considered because we want to be sure the instructor has the necessary skills and the environment can support the response form chosen but the needs of the individual child should be the primary concern.

Some people feel it is better to teach the child just one response form at a time, however, we have found that this is not always necessary or in fact beneficial. Different settings may lend themselves better to different response forms and using different response forms may allow the child to learn to request more things in a shorter time period. We would, however, avoid teaching multiple response forms to request the same item at the beginning. The following situation can be used to illustrate this point.

Brian is a 3 year old boy who lives in a house with 4 other children under the age of 6. Brian was taught to use the picture exchange system with photographs to request, and these pictures were placed in the location where the items or actions he could request typically occurred so he would have access to his communication system. His siblings would often take the photos down from their location so they were not available to him. The pictures were then placed in a book and Brian was taught to use a gesture to request his book when he wanted to request something. Brian had many caregivers during the day and went to many



different environments. Often his book would be forgotten or misplaced so he would not have access to his communication. It was determined that it would be beneficial to teach Brian to learn to use signs to request since he would always have his hands available. The pictures were still used at mealtimes since the setting and options for things he could request remained fairly constant in that environment. In addition, his school used pictures to request snacks and food items at mealtime at school. Brian was taught to request all toys and actions with signs, and pictures continued to be used for foods.

The two most important things to remember about teaching a child to request using any response form are:

1. The child must want the items
2. The child must be able to respond to the stimuli we are using to teach him to request (mand).

