

Using Fewer Questions



Encouraging children to communicate with you and with other children is a wonderful way to help them develop, practice, and refine communication skills. Helping children learn to effectively use words and to meaningfully express themselves in conversation is also an important part of any early childhood curriculum.

When the goal is to give children opportunities to communicate, adults often ask questions. Although asking questions can be a useful and effective way of getting information, continuously asking questions is not a natural way of communicating. You may actually discourage communication by asking questions if children do not know how to answer or feel intimidated under the pressure to respond.

Unless a question follows a child's lead in a discussion, it may serve to decrease further contributions from the child. Even a question like "How old are you?" limits what children are supposed to tell you and seems to encourage them to respond with only one or two words.

Using descriptive statements, on the other hand, encourages children to be active participants in the conversation. Descriptive statements and comments are not directive or inquisitive; they simply contribute interesting information to the discussion. Put simply, these statements report what is happening, what the child is doing, or what you are doing.

When you describe what a child is doing ("the doll is having tea with you"), what a group is doing ("there are five of us for snack, so I need five cups"), or what is happening ("everyone is getting wet in this rain shower"), you give children both an important language model and valuable information they can choose to add to or comment about, if they wish.

Occasionally asking questions is an effective strategy, especially if your questions are open-ended and designed to elicit children's input. But if your goal is to engage children in conversation, try using statements which describe the situation and add appropriate information. Here are a few examples of how questions can be reworded as descriptive statements:

- x Rather than "How old are you?" say "You just had a birthday."
- x Rather than "What color is your shirt?" say "Your shirt is red."
- x Rather than "Is everyone all done with their snack?" say "Everyone is finished eating their snack."
- x Rather than "Where are your shoes?" say "You don't have shoes on your feet!"
- x Rather than "What book do you want to read?" say "I found two books that look interesting, and I can't decide which one to read today."

Asking questions often keeps the questioner in control of the conversation. Using descriptive statements starts and maintains conversations that are non-threatening and gentle with a balance of control. The more you use descriptive statements, the less you will feel the need to use questions to get conversation started with young children.

Try It Out

When a child is having difficulty learning to communicate or forming words, a speech therapist may be involved. You can identify which strategies to use to help a particular child develop good communication skills by gathering the following information from the speech therapist:

- Way(s) the child communicates most effectively
- Kinds of communication the child understands
- Sounds the child is having difficulty making
- What to do when you cannot understand the child's speech or signs
- What skills the therapist and child are working on
- How you can help the child's communication development in your program
- Easy ways for you and the speech therapist to share information about the child's development

The speech therapist is an excellent resource to help you develop your skills in facilitating young children's communication skills. Sometimes it just takes effective communication between the two of you!

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *I'm confused. I've always thought that one of the best ways to get kids to talk is to ask them lots of questions.*

ANSWER: While asking a question usually produces a verbal response, some children seem to feel pressured by the necessity to respond and may turn away or just not answer. And many children who do respond use short and simplistic answers, such as in the following exchange (notice the number of words said by the child):

You ask, "Is that a new dress?" The child says, "Yup." You ask, "Where did you get it?" The child says, "For my birthday." You ask, "Did your mom give it to you?" The child says, "Nope." "Did Grandma give it to you?" The child says, "Nope." "Who gave you that pretty dress, then?" The child says, "Aunt Tillie."

In many cases, interactions based on questions do not result in meaningful conversation. The questioner controls the interaction and does most of the talking.

When your goal is to get children to communicate and engage in conversation (as opposed to just talk), you want to use methods that start—and maintain—meaningful exchanges. Using descriptive statements takes away the pressure of responding and at the same time, provides a language model centered on matters relevant to the child. When children choose to respond, they may elaborate in

delightful ways that provide the framework for your next statement (notice the balance in the number of words each person says):

You say, "You have a new dress today. The child is likely to say, "Yup, a slip, too, and a hat." You say, "I wonder who would give you a dress AND a slip AND a hat." The child says, "Oh, Aunt Tillie gave it to me, for my birthday. She asked my mama what size. See, I got sandals, too. See the bow? My black shoes got mud on them . . ."

In most cases, interactions based on relevant statements and observations result in conversation where there is a balance of talking. These conversations can go on and on, until one or the other person is done. When you use mostly questions to communicate with young children, YOU direct the conversation and in many ways, control the response. When you use descriptive statements to communicate, it is likely that children will use more language, add details, and direct the conversation to address their own interests.

