

+ 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:

- How old are you? ➔ *You just had a birthday.*
- What color is your shirt? ➔ *Your shirt is red.*
- Is everyone all done with their snack? ➔ *Everyone is finished eating their snack.*
- Where are your shoes? ➔ *You don't have shoes on your feet!*
- What book do you want to read?
➔ *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. + SAM/SLM

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+ FROM THE SOURCE

The Speech Therapist

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! + SAM

+ MAKING IT WORK

Using Posters

Posters, like the ones featured in the spotlight, can help you work toward a goal such as using fewer questions and more descriptive statements in your interactions with children. Here are some ideas for making posters work for you:

- ▶ Copy the poster onto colored paper and put it where it reminds you to use descriptive statements. If you put the poster in the greeting area, for example, you may be reminded to describe children's activities as they enter your program.
- ▶ Laminate and hang the poster at children's eye-level, and it becomes an interesting picture for children.
- ▶ Copy the poster for parents to inform them about what you are doing in your program and to give them ideas about using this strategy at home.

Recognize and celebrate the times you remember to use a descriptive statement. When you hear the children responding to your inquiries with one or two words, seize the moment and use descriptive statements. With practice, this strategy will become a habit, and you will use it almost without thinking! + SHW

+ NOTES FROM HOME:

Questioning So Many Questions

After Chelsea was enrolled in Ridgeway Preschool, I wanted to do whatever I could to make sure this would be a good place for my daughter to learn, grow, and make friends. I even volunteered at the school one morning every week for the first month to get a "feel" for what Chelsea's day was like. I was starting to feel like I had a real knack for working with kids, when one day during a quick break for a cup of tea, the head teacher gently suggested that I might want to use more descriptive statements with the children rather than asking so many questions.

At first I was a little offended! Wasn't this the "good" kind of language I had seen everyone model with Chelsea? The doctors would say, "Chelsea, you want to walk better, don't you?" The therapist would teach her new words by saying, "What color is this car?" or "Can you say, 'cookie'?" Even acquaintances we met in the grocery store or at church would say, "Are you being a good girl?" or "How did you get to be so BIG?" Eventually, both Rob and I settled into a comfortable routine of interacting with our daughter with what I now realize was just one long stream of questions. "Are you Mama's girl?" "Isn't that toast yummy?" "Why did you pull your sister's hair?" "Did you take your medicine?" Looking back, I wouldn't be surprised if people thought I sounded like a parrot ("Polly wants a cracker?").

The teacher explained that using descriptive statements like "that is a big blue circle you painted" actually encourages children to communicate. Questions, although they may seem to be a useful tool in getting children to talk, often add pressure to the conversation and may discourage future contributions from the child. I tried using descriptive statements with Chelsea at home that night. It is hard to remember not to use questions all of the time, but it's really nice to see how Chelsea responds to descriptive statements. I've finally started hearing how my little girl sees things, rather than telling her how I think she sees them. And that's what I learned in preschool this year. +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Child Care plus+ Communication Posters

Getting on the Child's Level



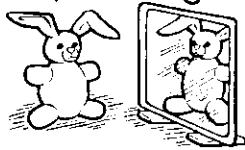
Position yourself at eye-level with the children so they know you are ready to be part of the conversation.

Responding Every Time



Respond to each child's words or gestures as much as possible.

Mirroring



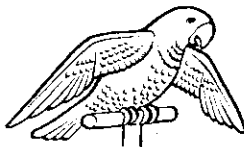
Imitate a child's sounds, facial expressions, or gestures.

Using Parallel Talk



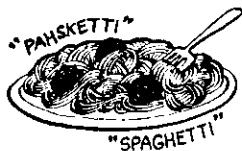
Use short, simple phrases to describe what a child is doing.

Using Self-talk



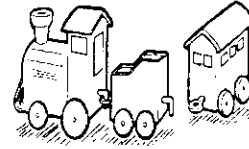
Talk about what you are doing, using language that matches the child's level of interest and understanding.

Reflecting



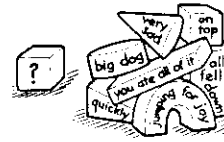
Listen to what a child says and repeat it back, using correct pronunciation and grammar.

Expanding



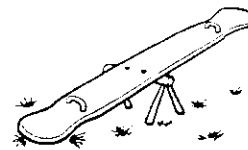
Listen to what a child says and repeat it back, adding a word or a phrase to expand the child's original message.

Using Descriptive Statements



Use fewer questions and more descriptive statements to start and maintain conversations.

Taking Turns



Repeat child's action or word, then pause to let the child take a turn. Continue the game as long as the child is interested.

Adding Something Different



Provide objects and experiences that engage children through novelty, obstacles, and surprise.

Each Child Care plus+ Communication Poster includes an illustration and an explanation of an effective communication strategy to use with young children. To order a set of ten 11" x 15" posters, send \$7.50* to:

Communication Posters
 Child Care plus+, Rural Institute on Disabilities
 University of Montana, 634 Eddy Avenue
 Missoula, MT 59812-6696

*For a LAMINATED set of ten posters, send \$27.50.

+ What do I do when . . . ?

QUESTION: *I'm confused. I've always thought that the way 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: *Is that a new dress? Yup. Where did you get it? For my birthday. Did your mom give it to you? Nope. Did Grandma give it to you? Nope. Who gave you that pretty dress, then? Aunt Tillie.* In many cases, interactions based on questions do not result in meaningful conversation, and the questioner does most of the talking.

When your goal is to get children to communicate (as opposed to just talk), you want to use methods that start—and maintain—meaningful conversation. 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: *You have a new dress today. Yup, a slip, too, and a hat. I wonder who would give you a dress AND a slip AND a hat. Oh, Aunt Tillie did, for my birthday. See, I got sandals with it. 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. + SLM

Child Care plus+ staff are available to answer questions, brainstorm, problem-solve, and provide resources and information about facilitating children's communication.

Call 1-800-235-4122

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

The New Language of Toys: Teaching Communication Skills to Children with Special Needs by S. Schwartz and J. Heller Miller (1996) is a 250-page guide for parents and teachers. It explains how to use everyday toys—both manufactured and homemade—to create activities that stimulate children to develop and improve their language skills. It describes specific toys, explains how they can be used to teach language, and provides actual dialogues for parents and teachers to use as guidelines when working with young children. Available for \$16.95 from Woodbine House, 6510 Bells Mill Road, Bethesda, MD 20817 or call 1-800-843-7323.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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