

Teaching your Child to Ask for What They Want

For so many children with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities, learning to ask for what they want is a challenge. Some children will not approach other people to talk, some may engage in problem behavior to get what they want, and others may have a limited range of words they can say, and as a result do not know what to say when they want something. Below are some general guidelines and information to help you teach your child how to ask for things

Teaching the child to approach another person and talk to get what they want is an important skill. By encouraging asking, the child may learn the value of social interactions. The child learns “I say what I want and I often get it!” Teaching the child to ask for what they want may also encourage general language development. The child learns that talking results in good things.

We refer to asking for something we want as a “mand”. A mand is one way of using a word. As children develop more complex language skills, they will learn to ask for a wide range of things, such as actions, activities, missing items, attention from others, and for other people to talk to them or answer questions. Although asking questions is also a form of a mand (the child gets what they want through hearing the answer to their question), in this document, we will focus on the basics of how to teach a child to ask for items or activities they want.

The basic format for asking for things is: Want it – Say it – Get it.

Steps in Teaching Children to Make Requests

Here are some general suggestions for teaching your child to ask for what they want. Keep in mind that these are general ideas that may need some adjusting for your child. If so, it may be wise to contact educators who have experience related to the area of “mand training”.

Get the child to want it: establish motivation

- One of the difficulties of teaching children to ask for what they want is finding out what they want. Another word for the child wanting something is “motivation”. Motivation occurs when something becomes valuable. We want pens when we have to write, we want water when we have not had a drink for a while or after exercising, we want toys when it is time to play, we want a blanket when we are cold.
- Motivation changes based on what happens over the course of the day. Defining motivation this way allows us to do things to alter whether something is wanted or not. Here is a simple example: food will likely become valuable to a child if they have not had food for a while. When they have not had food, the child may be more likely to do something to get food. It is at that time a parent is in a position to help the child learn to ask for the food item they want. The same may be true for a toy. The child may see a game board that involves shooting marbles into a toy hippo’s mouth. Giving the game to the child without the marbles, leads to the marbles becoming valuable to the child and the adult will have a perfect opportunity to teach the child to ask for the marbles. Here are some other examples of things that can become momentarily valuable:

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- After a period without water, we want water (this is the principle of deprivation). This only works for things related to biological needs (food, temperature, etc.).
- In the circumstance where having the chance to see a Thomas the Tank Engine video, getting a smart phone or tablet becomes valuable (this is learned motivation: most motivation works this way: a change in conditions alters the value of some other item or event).
- When getting ready to eat pudding, a spoon may become valuable.
- In the presence of someone who plays with the child, the value of a certain type of playful interaction may become valuable.
- In the presence of a console game (such as the Wii or Xbox), the remote becomes valuable

Once the child wants something, you can teach them to ask for it

- When motivation is in place (the person wants something), they will be more likely to **do something** to get what they want. If another person has what the person wants, it becomes more likely that the person will ask for what they want.
- In order to teach a child to ask for what they want, we have to make sure that there is motivation for the item.

Make it easy at first: use of prompts

- At first, we need to teach the child that it is easy to get the item or event through interacting with another person. Give the child some of what they want and say the name of the item or activity as you present it. This will teach the child that you are willing to provide what they want. By providing only a little at a time you are making sure that the child will continue to want the item.
- After the child is willing to approach another person to get what they want and is accepting things from the adult, parents can begin prompting the child to ask for what they want. A prompt is something the adult does that makes sure the behavior of asking for what they want will occur. Then, when the child asks for the item or event, they can experience the consequence of the behavior (hopefully something that is “fun” for them!) If the child gets what they want when they ask for it, it is more likely the next time they want that item, they will ask for it. When a behavior occurs more often because the behavior has resulted in things getting better, we say the behavior has been “reinforced”.
- The next step is to try to fade the prompt. We want the child to learn to ask for what they want independently. So as soon as possible, after the child has asked for what they want with a prompt, and they have received the item or action, provide a second opportunity in which the child gets to ask for the item with NO prompt. This is called a transfer trial. Remember that it best to give the child only a little of they want each time you have them practice asking for what they want. However, asking by themselves always results in getting better things (more amount, better quality, etc.). Here is one example of how we fade prompts:

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Step 1: When the child wants juice, you say juice and the child repeats juice after you. After the child says “juice” (or signs it) give a little juice.

Step 2: You give the child another opportunity to ask for the juice without your help. This time you give more juice than when they asked with your help.

- In some situations, the child may not be able to have the prompt go away completely. In such cases, you may want to say some of the word but not all of it. This is called partial prompt fading and is used to build greater independence. If the child has just asked for the ball after you said “ball”, you would provide another opportunity to ask for ball and say “b”; hopefully the child will then say “ball”. Remember, your goal is to fade all prompts so the child eventually asks independently.

If your child uses sign language

- Not all children can repeat a spoken word. Some children will need to learn another way of asking for what they want. In such cases, you can use sign language as a response. Sign language may help a child learn to speak vocally by teaching the child the power of talking to others.
- To prompt a mand for a child using sign language, we usually use an imitative prompt. Imitation is doing what another person does. In other words, we show the child what sign to use to get what they want. Sometimes, however, if the child does not have strong imitation skill for the particular item, you can use a physical prompt. If you use a physical prompt, one would gently move the child’s hands into the position of the sign and immediately after the child has their hands in the right position, deliver the thing they want. Generally, imitation prompts are preferred because it allows the child to emit the sign more independently.

If your child uses an electronic device or picture exchange

- If your child uses pictures or a device, you can gesture to the picture/button on screen or physically guide their hand to make the right selection. When they hand the picture or make the right selection, then deliver the item.

Selecting what to teach the child to ask for

- When choosing the things a child will be taught to ask for, there are several guiding suggestions:
 - Pick items that are usually going to be valuable to the child.
 - Pick items that the adult can control. This means that the child cannot get the item on their own but rather has to go through the adult.
 - Pick items that allow immediate delivery following the child’s request.
 - Pick items allow for brief exposure time, are consumable, or otherwise go away quickly, so that they have many opportunities to ask for things they want.
 - Pick items that are easy for the child to say or sign.

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If errors occur

- Sometimes children will make an error in asking for what they want. If this happens, briefly remove the item, pause for 3 to 5 seconds, then re-present the same item but this time immediately tell the child the correct thing to say (an immediate prompt) in order to avoid having the error occur again. Remember an error can involve the child saying the wrong item, but can also involve the child asking in the wrong way (for example, saying the correct word while also yelling).

When to teach requesting

- When working on teaching the child to ask for what they want, it is best to provide many opportunities to request throughout the day. Practice asking for both the things you are teaching them to ask for as well as to practice the things they have already learned. For example, if you are helping the child learn to ask for “book” and “train”, you can provide mixed-in opportunities to practice asking for things the child already knows how to ask for such as “cat” and “pencil”. Use Prompts and prompt fading for the things they are just learning to ask for.
- For some children, it may be helpful to have brief scheduled lessons (mand sessions). You can also build opportunities to ask for things into daily routines such as cooking, mealtime, doing laundry, playing with toys and so forth.
- Another important part of the process is always teaching more than one mand at a time and teaching them to ask for a variety of things.

Some additional important considerations

- Remember to keep the motivation strong for things the child wants. Here are some suggestions that help maintain motivation for specific items:
 - Vary the items when teaching the child to ask for things.
 - Stop providing an item **before** it is no longer valuable
 - Vary the way you deliver the item. Sometimes hand it to the child, sometimes move it toward them slowly, sometimes make it appear quickly, and so forth.
 - Surprise the child with opportunities to ask for what they want (do not make the timing of the mand opportunities to be predictable).
 - Deliver only a small amount of any item or reinforcer at any one time.
- Remember to check for motivation before expecting the child to ask for it. You will not be teaching the right skill if you have the child ask for something they don't want in the moment.
- Checking for motivation could involve holding up the item and the observing whether the child either looks at or reaches for it.
- Checking for motivation could also involve a simple observation where you notice what the child is looking at, reaching for, or otherwise “showing interest”.
- Try to avoid presenting two items at a time (as in providing a choice). In order to tell what the child wants you may try to provide a choice between two items but as soon as

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the child looks at what they want, put the items down then present only the preferred item.

- Avoid the temptation to teach the child to use multiple words to ask for what they want too early in the process. It is better to help the child learn to ask for lots of different things rather than using more words each time they ask. If we tell the child to use more words to ask for what they want, you run the risk of the child learning to say extra words for the wrong reason.

In summary

- Teaching a child to talk can be a lot of fun for adults. It is also a very important part of being a parent. Teaching children with autism spectrum disorders to learn to communicate effectively can be a challenge. By starting with teaching the child to ask for what they want, many of the challenges of teaching the child to talk socially can become fun for both parent and child. We hope this description of teaching this important skill has been helpful but if additional information is necessary, videos of “mand training” are available on the PaTTAN.net website under autism videos. Here are the direct links to some of the videos:

• MAND TRAINING VIDEOS
• Mand Training: Types of Mands
• Mand Training: Mand Target Selection
• Mand Training: Teaching a Vocal Mand
• Mand Training: Teaching a Signed Mand
• Mand Training: Transfer Trials
• Mand Training: Shaping, Prompting and Fading Prompts
• Mand Training Example: Mand Training Early Learner Vocal Responding (With Narration-Mike)
• Mand Training Example: Mand Training Early Learner Signed Responding (With Narration-Brandon)
• Mand Training Example: Intermediate Learner Vocal Responding (With Narration-Katie)