Don't Ask, Do Tell!

Do you want to know ONE thing that you can today that will have a profound effect on your students who use AAC? Something that won't take any extra time, money, or materials and is simple, available, and effective? Sounds too good to be true, right? But it isn't – and all you have to do is: STOP asking questions!

Intended Purposes of Questions

Teams who support students with AAC needs are eager to help them communicate, and will sometimes decide that asking questions a good way to do that. Let's look at some of the reasons people have said that they pose questions to their AAC users:

- to engage students in interactions
- to get the student to talk more, or use their AAC system more
- so that both people take turns to contribute to a conversation
- to remind the student of what they should do without actually telling them
- to get information from the student, to find out about an experience or event
- to know what they know, see what they have learned, and what they may not yet understand

Actual Outcomes

No doubt the outcomes above are important for many AAC users. So is the use of questions an effective way to achieve these outcomes? Do questions actually work the way we think they do, and get these results? For years I have observed conversations and interactions between students who use AAC and their adult partners. What has become very clear is that asking questions does not achieve these desired outcomes. Questions do not promote students' communication progress, and very often they are associated with other, negative impacts. When used improperly, questions can:

- limit initiation
- reduce genuine participation
- encourage dependence
- increase frustration
- encourage apathy
- create conversational imbalance
- decrease motivation
- provide poor/inaccurate language models
- generate inaccurate data
- perhaps most importantly, occupy the space intended for teaching and learning

The quick communication sample procedure outlined below can be a powerful tool to demonstrate the disparity between the intended outcomes and the actual outcomes of the teams' use of questions.

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<u>Sampling Communication</u>

To collect a snapshot of typical communication exchanges, observe the student in natural environments with familiar partners. Using a simple chart, record the types of messages that the adult and student are producing. A typical chart might include the following fields:

Adult: "Question" -   asking for information, expecting an answer
                        "Directive" - telling student what to do/not to do
                        "Statement"   comment, give information; no student reply expected
Student: "Response"   action or message in reply to adult question or directive
                        "Initiation"   spontaneous communication

The empty chart might look like this:

Adult			Student	
Question	*Directive*	*Statement*	*Response*	*Initiation*

During the observation, put a hash mark in one of the sections for each message produced by the adult and student. The chart can help you see more objectively the balance of communication turns and the student's opportunity to be taught (e.g. through statements) versus tested (e.g. through questions and directives). Here is a simple example of an interaction followed by the corresponding chart entries:

Adult: *"What is next?".*
Student: *responds by pointing to "lunch" on their schedule (or saying "lunch", or getting up to get their lunch, etc.).*

Adult			Student	
Question	*Directive*	*Statement*	*Response*	*Initiation*
I			*I*	

Here is another example that is a little more involved:

        Adult: "What is next?".
        Student: no reply
        Adult: "Do you know what's next?".
        Student: looking around room
        Adult: "Check your schedule and see what's next."
        Student: looks at schedule but does not access it
        Adult: "Is it time for lunch?"
        Student: points to lunch picture

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Adult			Student	
Question	**Directive**	**Statement**	**Response**	**Initiation**
III	I		I	

In this example, we can see that the adult asked three questions and gave one a directive before the student responded.

As simple as this process is, the information it can yield is very powerful. Below is a chart that represents a distribution of entries that is not uncommon in my field work:

Adult			Student	
Question	*Directive*	*Statement*	*Response*	*Initiation*
H̶H̶ ̶H̶H̶ IIII H̶H̶ ̶H̶H̶ IIII	H̶I̶I̶ II	III	H̶I̶I̶ II	III

Looking at the total number of messages communicated as compared to the number in each section we can see some patterns. In the chart above, we can see that of the fifty messages communicated, forty (80%) came from the adult. Nearly all of those were questions or directives (37), yet the student only responded seven times. That means that the student did not even respond to thirty of the adult's utterances!

Because this process is so informal and brief, it is helpful to check with the team regarding the information collected to determine the accuracy. It is surprising how consistently impressions ("Seems like there are a lot of questions."), data (lots of questions marked on chart) and team report ("Yes, that is typical of the way we interact") coincide to reflect the same picture.

Simplified Observation: A more simplified version might look like this:

Adult Questions	*Student Communication*
H̶H̶ H̶H̶ H̶H̶ IIII IIII	H̶H̶

Here we don't have a lot of detail but still do capture a good overview of the balance of communication and types of adult messages.

Valid questions:

So, is it ever okay to ask questions? Yes, of course. A valid question in natural communication is simply one that you do not already know the answer to. If you know the answer to the question before you ask it, then it is a test! Here are some examples of valid questions:

- "What do you want?" – when you truly do not know what the student's choice is
- "What did you do this weekend?" or other social interaction and turn-taking questions
- "What is the setting of the story?" or other academic test questions

- "What do you think will happen?" or open, thought provoking questions
- "How do you feel?" or other state of being questions

Finding the Questions

It can be surprisingly difficult to notice the questions that are often pervasive in our interactions with users of AAC. A general conversation about not asking questions is not enough – team members will nod in agreement and then return to their familiar forms of interaction without even realizing it! Some strategies that may help "find the questions" are listed below:

- Immediate feedback: Identifying examples that are specific to the individual as they occur (or soon after) is very helpful for recognizing their own questioning behavior.
- Video: Videotape yourself working with the child and review the footage, looking for questions and determining if they are valid or not.
- Peer support: Ask a colleague to observe your interactions and to identify "test questions". Have them cue you in real time to recognize them and practice changing them to non-directives.
- Cheat Sheet: Write out a list of things you can say instead of asking questions (statements, comments, observations) and keep it visible during interactions with the student.

Replacing the Questions

Reducing the use of questions requires thoughtful observation of the behavior and the implementation of a clear action plan. Below are some ideas for how to incorporate non-directive language into your interactions with students to help support their communication development.

NON-DIRECTIVE TEACHING ☺	DIRECTIVE TESTING ☹
- Partner provides input that does not direct student to say or do something - Partner describes by matching spoken or written language with observed events and experiences - Partner makes observations - Partner comments - Partner makes statements - Partner provides the language that seems to match the student's experience in that moment - Partner models or shows and "thinks aloud" when appropriate - Partner models use of the student's communication system without the expectation of student performance	- Partner directs, or focuses the student to a very specific response - Often shifts student from role of initiator to responder role - Student response is right-wrong - Student errors possible/probably - Partner asking questions with known answers - Partner asking test questions to engage student - Partner ignoring student's communication in favor of more desired formats - directing student to perform - Examples: "Show me…" "Find the…"

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• Partner asks genuine questions (ones you don't know the answer to) • <u>Examples</u> "I wonder…." "I think…" "I am going to ..." "I see you are....." "That makes me think of..."	"Where is….?" "Point to …" "Tell me …" "Say …"

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