

Skill 7: Requesting an Item / Person / Activity

What does requesting an item / person / or activity mean?

Being able to request an item or object or activity is a fundamental aspect of communication for everyone. Think of how many times you want or need something throughout the day. You might ask a spouse for a cup of coffee or say that you need a pair of scissors. At work, you might tell your supervisor you need a new computer or ask for a day off. At your favorite restaurant, you might ask for your favorite sandwich and then say, "I want mustard on that." Children are no different! They spend a lot of time requesting items they want or need while at home, at school, or out in the community.

Some examples might include:

- Pulling a caregiver to the kitchen and looking the crackers on the counter as if to say, I want those crackers.
- Pointing to a book as if to say, I want that one.
- I want milk.
- May I have some cookies?
- I need my blanket.
- Can I play on the computer?
- I want mom!
- I need a pencil.

Why is this skill important to teach?

Teaching a child how to request the things they want or need helps improve quality of life, or general well-being. Being able to get the things, people, or activities that we want or need is also part of something called self-advocacy. Self-advocacy includes knowing what you want or need and being able to communicate that with other people. This might be as simple as a child recognizing that they are thirsty, going to a caregiver, and requesting their favorite drink. It could also be as complicated as knowing what kind of career you want and asking for the types of classes needed to prepare for adulthood. Teaching a child how to ask for the things they want or need can help meet their immediate physical needs but also their overall dreams and ambitions.

Why is asking for an item/person/or activity difficult for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Due to the characteristics of ASD, some children may struggle with recognizing what they need, such as understanding that they are thirsty versus hungry. Other children with ASD may know what they want but not be able to communicate that to someone else. Some children with ASD may pull you to the item they want at home but not be able to say in the car, “I want some juice.” Imagine how frustrated you would be if you couldn’t request the things you want or need such as your favorite game, your favorite foods, or your favorite TV show? It would be equally frustrating if everyone around you was always guessing at what you wanted or needed—and often guessing wrong. It’s important to remember that if a child cannot make their wants and needs known to others, they will use behavior as a means of communication. In other words, if a child cannot ask for milk, they may scream or cry or kick until a caregiver guesses that’s what the child wants.

What are some considerations for teaching a child to ask for items or activities?

Because requesting the things we want or need is such an integral part of our everyday lives, this is a great way to start teaching communication skills! When teaching a child any new skill, we often use some type of reinforcement as encouragement. Sometimes that motivation includes just a quick good job or maybe even a sticker or a treat. However, when a child asks for something they want or need, the child is naturally reinforced by getting that item or object or activity. Since a child is rewarded with the item or object or activity they want when they ask for it, the child is motivated to keep using this skill. By practicing this skill, children can quickly learn the power of communication! Additionally, this is a skill that can be practiced throughout the day during natural routines such as eating breakfast, during play time, or even while out running errands.

It’s important to understand that a child can ask for two different kinds of items / people / or activities: ones they can see and ones that are out of sight. Children with ASD may be better at understanding concrete concepts at first, so start teaching this skill with things the child can see right in front of them. Often, just seeing the item can prompt the child to make a request. When the child masters that skill, then caregivers can move to items / people / or activities that are not in front of the child. Helping a child move from things that are in sight to things that are out of sight will generalize this skill and show the child they can request for different purposes with different things in different situations.

Before starting, it’s also important to take into account how your child communicates. Some children with ASD use Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC) such as sign language, picture exchange, or even a device that speaks when a button is pushed. Other children with ASD can use some verbal speech but need support by using cue cards with a word and/or picture or by using a sentence strip or choice board with different options for greetings, questions, and comments. Be sure the child has the vocabulary they need to participate in any activity.

What materials will I need?

Families might need the following for teaching a child how to ask for items / people / or activities:

- Consider the child's preferences and what items / people / and activities that they really enjoy. Teaching this skill will only be successful if the objects and activities available are very motivating and rewarding to your child. If what is available isn't appealing, or it's easy to get normally without any help, it's not a good option for these activities.
- White board
- Markers
- Pre-printed visual supports to include cue cards or sentence strips
- For Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users, be sure the child has access to the vocabulary needed to participate including sign language, picture exchange items, or a communication device that is programmed with the appropriate pictures and words.
- Consider times and places to initially practice this skill where your child will not be distracted by TVs, pets, or a lot of sounds or people.

Activity #1 Placing Toys Out of Reach

- For this activity, you will need to determine an item a child clearly enjoys playing with ahead of time. This could be a toy the child plays with every morning upon waking, a toy the child enjoys playing with during bath time, or a game the child plays on a regular basis.
- Next, find a place to store the toy that the child can see but cannot easily reach. Ideally, this would be on a shelf just high enough that the child needs your assistance in getting the toy. Storing the toy in this manner means that the child must communicate in some way, that they want this toy and they want your help in getting access to it. It's important to note that this is not a game of keep away. This is strategically planned organization that motivates the child to communicate, "Can I have ____?" or "I want ____". Let's use a child's favorite bath time toy as an example. In this example, we'll use a toy boat.
- First, make sure the toy boat is stored on a shelf in the bathtub where the child can see it but can't reach it on their own.
- Next, begin all the steps for getting in the bath and bathing. Do not place the child's toys in the tub.
- If the child looks at the boat and says, "I want my boat" or "Can I have my boat?" or uses any form of AAC to communicate, immediately hand over the toy.
- If the child looks at the boat but doesn't communicate "I want..." or "Can I have..." wait a few seconds to see if they attempt to request the item.
- If the child does not respond, prompt the child by:
 - Pointing to the boat.
 - Asking, "Do you want the boat?" (If a child uses echolalia and repeats the phrase, "Do you want the boat?" you can change this to say "I want the boat.")
 - Modeling the form of AAC the child uses such as sign language, picture exchange, or pushing a button on a device.

- Wait a few seconds for the child to respond.
- If the child responds with something like “I want the boat,” immediately hand over the toy.
- If the child reaches for the boat but is not able to communicate the phrase, say the first part of the phrase, “I want...” while pointing to the boat. Grab the boat and say, “Boat.” “I want the boat.”
- Immediately hand over the boat to the child.
- If the child can only say part of the phrase such as, “want boat” be sure to expand on that by modeling, “I want the boat” before handing over the item.
- Because this is a difficult skill for some children, this may take a lot of practice! You can practice this skill in just about any situation throughout the day. Remember though, this is not a game of keep away. This is simply a small, short moment where you can teach the child a very powerful communication skill!

Activity #2 Withholding a Needed Item for a Daily Routine of Favorite Activity (in sight)

- In this activity, consider all the items a child needs for a daily routine or activity that they really enjoy. Remove some of the needed items for the activity out of reach. Some examples might include: placing the coloring book in reach but the crayons out of reach for coloring activities, placing construction paper in reach but scissors or glue out of reach for art activities, or placing the bowl, spoon, and milk on the table but leave the cereal out of reach on the counter at breakfast. Remember the needed item should be **in sight** but *out of reach*. When the child starts the activity, they will need the item that is not readily available and will be more motivated to communicate, “Can I have...” or “I need...”
- As the child starts their activity or routine, wait to see if they request the needed item. In the breakfast example, wait a few seconds for the child to sit down at the table, see the bowl, spoon, and milk, but not the cereal.
- If the child requests the cereal, immediately hand over the item.
- If the child does not respond, prompt the child by:
 - Pointing to the cereal.
 - Asking, “Do you want the Cheerios?” (If a child uses echolalia and repeats the phrase, “Do you want the Cheerios?” you can change this to say, “I want Cheerios.”)
 - Modeling the form of AAC the child uses such as sign language, picture exchange, pushing a button on a device, or pointing to the child’s sentence strip that says, “I want Cheerios.”
- Wait a few seconds for the child to respond.
- If the child responds with “I want Cheerios” or “Can I have Cheerios,” immediately hand over the item.
- If the child reaches for the cereal but is not able to communicate the phrase, say the first part of the phrase, “I want...” while pointing to the cereal. Grab the cereal and say, “Cheerios.” “I want Cheerios.” Then immediately hand over the item.
- If the child can only say part of the phrase such as, “want Cheerios” be sure to expand on that by modeling, “I want Cheerios” before handing over the item.

Activity #3 Placing Needed Items Out of Sight

- The purpose of this activity is to motivate the child to communicate their need for an item that they cannot see but know they need. Requesting an object when it is out of sight is the first step toward requesting things independently. This skill should be attempted once a child has successfully mastered the skill of communicating their need for an item they can see but cannot reach. While teaching this skill, caregivers can use printed pictures of the needed item as a means of prompting the child to identify what they need. While it might sound like the same thing as having the actual item in sight but out of reach, this is actually a more complex skill and the child learns that a picture can represent an actual object.
- In this activity, the ideal situation will be for the caregiver to be sitting closely alongside the child and doing a preferred activity together with multiple pieces or items involved. For example, if a child enjoys building train sets there are many different pieces of tracks and trains that could be withheld. Or, if a child is doing an art activity, the child will need paper, scissors, glue, and googly eyes. To motivate the child to request an item, the caregiver will hold back a needed item in their hand or under their lap and out of sight. For example, if the child needs the glue stick to complete the art activity, the caregiver would sit next to the child, hold the glue stick in their hand, and carefully hide their hand in their lap.
- As the child starts their activity or routine, wait to see if they request the needed item. In the art example, wait a few seconds for the child to sit down at the table, start cutting paper, and then looking for the glue to put the eyes on. If the child requests the glue, immediately hand over the item.
- If the child does not respond, the caregiver can prompt the child by:
 - Asking “What do you need?”
 - Pointing to a picture of the glue stick.
 - Asking, “Do you need glue?” (If a child uses echolalia and repeats the phrase, “Do you need glue?” you can change this to say, “I need glue.”)
 - Modeling the form of AAC the child uses such as sign language, picture exchange, pushing a button on a device, or pointing to the appropriate sentence strip.
- Wait a few seconds for the child to respond.
- If the child responds with “I need glue” or “Can I have the glue,” immediately hand over the item.
- If the child can only communicate part of the phrase such as, “Glue” or “Need glue” be sure to expand on that by modeling the whole sentence, “I need glue” before handing over the item.
- Remember, this is not a game of keep away but only a small, short moment in time where the child is highly motivated to communicate in order to get the items they need. When the child masters the skill using the picture as a prompt, try the activity without the visual support. Caregivers can also teach this skill with a board game that involves multiple pieces such as dice for more practice! Consider using toys and other play items that can be shared, and model taking control of the toy by gently taking the object and saying, “my turn” before then prompting the child to request the object after it has been removed from sight.

Social Skill Extension Activity

- Now that a child has an understanding of how to communicate a request for items they can see and ones that are out of sight, consider ways to expand a child's social communication skills in a variety of different environments. After all, how we ask for things we want or need at home or with friends can be very different than how we ask for things we want or need while at grandma's house or while at a restaurant. A child may be encouraged to use more formal language such as, "May I have a glass of milk, please" or may be required to get a waiter's attention with a quick wave and an "Excuse me." Or, a child may need to use very informal language when with friends and say something such as, "Hey, man, pass the chips."
- To start this activity, write a short social narrative about the different ways a person can ask for the things they want and need. A social narrative is simply a short story that tells a child what to do, how to do it, and why it is important. Talk about when to use formal versus informal phrases. For example, saying "Hey, man, pass the chips" is probably not a good idea when at grandma or grandpa's house! And of course, when with friends, we are rarely very formal and we tend to avoid phrases such as, "Excuse me, Jack, could you please hand me those chips?"
- Next, role-play different ways to say these phrases during activities at home. This may take some practice!
- Now, follow-up by practicing requesting for different items, people, or activities while out in the community. Visit grandma's house and practice politely saying, "May I have the salt, please?" Visit favorite restaurants and have the child practice ordering their favorite ice cream and asking for a napkin.
- The more a child can practice different ways to request items with different people, the better! Mixing up the communication partners, the setting, and the items requested will all help children to 'generalize' the skill and be able to use it independently.

Links to resources on our website!

- Autism Q&A: Introduction to Teaching Young Children with Autism ...
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1077>
- Functions of Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/ta/vagoals/communication/...to.../functions.cfm>
- How To Video Series - VCU Autism Center for Excellence
https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/