



Long and Short Term Strategies for Reducing Specific Repetitive Questions

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Family members and professionals are often puzzled about what to do when an individual begins to ask repetitive questions. Like most things that involve individuals across the autism spectrum, the answer is not simple and clear cut. Instead, it is dependent on the circumstances surrounding the usage of the repetitive questions.

Repetitive questions may serve a variety of functions for the person with autism, Aspergers, or other pervasive developmental disorder. What is confusing is that the same question may serve different functions at different times thereby requiring different strategies. The ability to "read" a situation may depend on the communication partner's familiarity with the person with autism and what he or she knows about that person's social and repetitive behaviors. Strategy selection is based on correctly guessing the function or real purpose of the person's repetitive question. This article lists both long term and short term strategies that emanate from the communicative purposes of repetitive questions. The connection will be clearer as the reader reviews the possible communicative functions in the next section and relates them to the strategy sections.

Possible Functions or Reasons for Repetitive Questioning:

- Inability or difficulty adequately communicating ideas via oral speech.
- Difficulty knowing how to initiate or maintain a conversation.
- Lack of other strategies for gaining attention in a positive way.
- Need for information.
- Need for reassurance.
- Need to escape a situation that is boring or unpleasant.
- Need to avoid transitioning to a new situation.
- Desire to be social.
- Need to be in control of the situation and/or attempt to keep the social interaction within his/her level of understanding.
- Fascination with predictable answers.
- Desire to demonstrate knowledge or competency by content of questions.
- A motor planning problem which makes novel utterances more difficult to produce in affective situation.

Possible Strategies to Teach Adaptive Skills

Long Term Strategies—Which ones used depend on the function of the questions.

- Introduce an augmentative means of communication that may be more efficient either as a primary or backup system. Options include backup communication boards or card sets.
- Use a scripted format to introduce better conversational strategies; practice varying scripts and situations.
- Use a topic notebook to suggest other subjects to discuss with various people.
- Provide visual information that may reduce anxiety (e.g., schedule boards, activity charts).
- If questioning reflects task avoidance, analyze the environment and the person's schedule and change accordingly.

- Provide positive alternative situations for the person with autism spectrum disorder to use his special knowledge. For someone with extensive knowledge about cars, help him develop a book that could be shown to other people.

Short Term Strategies—Which ones used depend on the function of the questions.

- Redirect the person to augmentative communication materials or topic notebook in order to assist himself with initiation or topic shift.
- Remind the person, using a visual or verbal cue, of what has been learned in scripted practice that would apply to this situation.
- Set a limit on the number of repetitive questions or the amount of time for the interaction and share this information with the person with autism spectrum disorder. Let the person know when you will be free to talk on a different topic and have it built into his/her schedule.
- Reverse the question to see if the person already knows the answer to his/her own question.
- Suggest an alternative activity so the opportunity for interaction is maintained but the focus shifts from the attempt at conversation to something of mutual interest and less stress.
- Use a checklist so that if the questions reflect anxiety about his/her schedule, the person with autism can independently check off events until the target activity occurs.
 - get in van at 6:30
 - drive for 30 minutes to shopping mall
 - buy CD
- Write the answer on paper as the question is answered the first time. Redirect back to the message on the paper if the question is repeated and the assumed function of seeking information is the same.
- Tell the person with autism spectrum disorder that you already told him this information (i.e., responses to his questions) but you would be willing to discuss topics A, B, or C and let him choose.

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