

# *ADR Skill of the Month*

## *The Art of Question*

A successful questioner comes armed with a well-stocked “tool kit” of useful questions. That’s because good questions are hugely important, and crafting them is definitely more art than science.

We have all been in that conversation where we didn’t have a clue of what the person was talking about, sometimes leaving the conversation more confused than when we entered. Here’s a recent special education example. The other day I was speaking with a parent who had been told by the District representative that it was the District’s responsibility to provide “F.A.P.E.” Unaware that these letters stand for “Free and Appropriate Public Education”- but too embarrassed to admit it – the parent waited until after the meeting to call the SELPA. I let her know that she wasn’t alone in her confusion; that we in the special education profession probably use way too many abbreviations and insider lingo. I also assured her that we **want** her to ask clarifying questions; that this is a main part of what the whole I.E.P. team meeting is about.

Parents and District staff need to ask helpful questions to ensure not only that we understand what is being said, but also to make sure we fully understand the **interests** of the person who is speaking. It is also the

responsibility of the speaker to make sure she/he is being understood. So, in the illustration above, a learning point for the District representative was the need to frequently “check in” with the parent, to be certain they were on the same page throughout the conversation. Employing effective **question strategies** would have easily prevented the problem.

Asking questions – the right ones, that is – can also be a useful tool when assisting others to resolve their own problems. People will come to me for advice, often even wanting me to tell them the solution. Instead, by posing a few artful questions, I’m likely to uncover just what the true interests are. This helps frame the issues so that they may effectively problem-solve for themselves. And when they do, they feel much more ownership than if I overtly advise or give direction. (Not that advice and direction can’t come up later...)

***See the following page for sample questions and tips for practicing this skill.***

## Sample Questions and Tips for Practicing the Skill..

Review the following sampling of conversation-starters and questions; maybe even carry them around with you. When you are in a conversation or meeting, practice the art of questioning by trying out some of these:

- Tell me more about ...
- I'm not sure I understand the part about...
- Let me make sure I understood correctly.
- Can you help me understand?
- What would you like to see happen today?
- Let me summarize what you just said.
- I gather you have been discouraged about...
- It would help me if I understood better how you came to decide on this specific request.
- Help me understand your view/perception of the issues.
- What would it look like to you if this were resolved/not resolved?
- What will the program look like without this part?
- I want to thank you for discussing such a hard issue with us and hope you can tell us more about...
- I'm not sure I got this part of your overview correct. I understand that when you asked for...
- What truths can you find in what the other person is saying?
- Does understanding this better help you understand their perspective? And if so, how?
- How can what you are hearing today open new possibilities for a resolution?
- What exactly did you hear them say?
- How did you come to this idea/belief/value of a resolution?

*If you'd like to see more such samples, feel free to e-mail Marc Purchin at [sw\\_adr@lacoed.edu](mailto:sw_adr@lacoed.edu).*

## Questionable Questions:

- Avoid questions that can only be answered by a "yes" or "no."
- Avoid questions that begin with "Why." (They tend to get people all defensive.)
- Avoid asking anyone to talk about their "side."

### **This final tip was mentioned last month but it fits for this one as well:**

Use the Question! If you're in a conversation and feel you're slipping – as in already tuning out so you can prepare your devastating retort – then HALT. One good way to do that is to force yourself to ask a non-threatening question. Then wait for the response and allow your mind to slow down and absorb; to resume listening to the other party.