

## Comments versus Questions: The Four to One Rule

If we reflect on what we do ordinarily, we might recognise that we sometimes ask children a lot of questions. Sometimes our children don't answer the questions we've asked because they do not understand them. Asking questions that children do not yet understand could impact on how much children interact with us, how much they get involved with the activity and whether they enjoy the experience.

When children are learning to talk we need to watch, wait and actively listen to them before commenting on whatever they appear interested in or what they are doing more often than we ask them questions. This is an effective way of developing children's knowledge and understanding of the world and it also helps support their language development. It can help if we follow the Four to One Rule where we make four comments for every question asked. It sounds simple doesn't it? However, changing our behaviour is trickier than we might think. Moving to a mind-set where we make more comments and reduce the number of questions asked takes practise.



### You could:

- Name the things your child appears interested in
- Talk about what your child is doing
- Describe the objects your child is using
- Explain what is happening
- Recognise and talk about how your child is feeling
- Make links to other experiences

We also need to ensure the questions we ask are meaningful and are at the right level for the child we're interacting with. Overleaf you'll find a guide to the Blank Language Scheme (1978) which ranks questions depending on their level of complexity. We can use the guide to help us recognise which questions are easier and which are harder for children to understand and respond to.

Here are some top tips to try when using the Four to One Rule:

- **Get down to your child's level and move position if necessary so you are face-to-face with them.**
- **Observe what your child is doing and listen to what they are saying.**
- **Follow your child's lead by commenting using some of the ideas above.**
- **Before asking a question, gain your child's attention by saying their name, then wait for them to look at you.**
- **Ensure the question you're going to ask is at the right level for your child. If you are unsure which level to use, please check the handout overleaf.**
- **Use objects, props or pictures to aid your child's understanding of the question.**
- **After you've asked the question, wait up to 10 seconds for your child to process the question and respond.**
- **If your child doesn't respond, repeat the same question.**
- **Wait up to another 10 seconds.**
- **If your child still doesn't respond, model the answer and ask a simpler question next time.**

Remember to avoid asking closed questions which require a 'yes' or 'no' response. Again, this can be tricky as questions that start with 'Can you ...?' or 'Did you...?' all result in this type of response. These types of questions are simple to answer but they limit language development as they only require one of two answers and they also close down conversations.

You might find you ask a question when you meant to make a comment but please don't worry. Simply answer the question yourself instead! This way your child will hear you give a model of the question and an appropriate answer.