

# A PEATC

*Do You Know...*



## Asking the Right Questions: A Tool for Empowering Families

Fact Sheet for Virginia's Parents

When decisions are being made about your child, **asking strong questions** helps make sure you are part of the conversation. This factsheet focuses on how to choose, shape, and communicate questions so they are effective, respectful, and move conversations forward at meetings, on the phone, and in emails.

### Why Asking Questions Is Important

When schools or other professionals make decisions that affect your child, asking questions can help you:

- **understand** what is really happening
- get **clear information** instead of assumptions
- **participate** more fully in meetings
- **advocate** for your child in a calm and informed way

### Choosing the Right Questions

You may have many questions, but you may not have time to ask them all. **Prioritizing** helps ensure the most important issues are addressed. Ask yourself:

- Which questions matter most **right now**?
- Which questions help me understand **why this decision is being considered**?
- Which questions help clarify **how the decision will be made**?
- Which questions help define **my role** and when my input matters?

Tip: Write down your top three questions before the meeting.

### Types of Questions and When to Use Them

**Different questions serve different purposes.** Using a mix of question types can help you get both clear facts and a deeper understanding.

**Closed-ended questions:** These are usually answered with yes, no, or a short response. They are useful for **confirming facts**. Examples: Has my child already been evaluated? Is this support available in all classrooms?

**Open-ended questions:** These invite explanation and discussion. They are helpful for **understanding reasoning, options, and next steps**. Examples: What data or information led to this recommendation? What supports have already been tried, and what were the results?

### Improving Your Questions

Sometimes a question doesn't get you the information you need — not because it's a bad question, but because it needs to be reframed. Small changes in wording can lead to more productive conversations. Examples are on the next page.

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**Turn statements into questions.** Statements can sound like disagreement and may shut down discussion. Turning them into questions invites explanation and problem-solving.

- Instead of: “This doesn’t seem appropriate.”
- Try: “Can you explain how this meets my child’s needs?”

**Turn closed-ended questions into open-ended ones.** Yes/No questions can limit the conversation. Open-ended questions encourage more detailed responses and help you understand the reasoning.

- Instead of: “Is this working?”
- Try: “How do we know whether this is working?”
- Or: “What data or information are we using to decide this is effective?”

**Ask follow-up questions.** If an answer feels unclear or incomplete, it’s okay to ask for more information. .

- “Can you say more about that?”
- “What does that look like in practice?”
- “Can you give an example?”

**Slow the conversation when needed.** If information is coming too fast, asking clarifying questions can help everyone stay on the same page.

- “Can we pause and go over that again?”
- “I want to make sure I understand before we move on.”

Strong questions don’t create conflict — they help ensure decisions are thoughtful, clear, and based on your child’s individual needs.

### Communicating Your Questions Effectively

**How you ask a question** can be just as important as the question itself. Be **calm and respectful**, even when the topic is difficult. Ask **one question** at a time. **Take notes** so you don’t feel rushed and **ask for clarification** if you don’t understand. **Summarize** what you heard to confirm understanding – “So what I’m hearing is...” Asking for clarity is not being difficult — it is being engaged.

**If a question cannot be answered right away**, ask who will follow up, when you should expect a response, and in what format (email, phone, etc.). Remember, you are your child’s best advocate!

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/RESOURCES:

Understood.org Questions to Ask Before and During Your Child’s IEP Meeting  
Wrightslaw How to Get Services by Asking Questions

*A portion of this fact sheet was adapted with permission from: Empowering Parents: Unlocking the Power of the Right Questions, a workshop developed by the Navy Region Mid Atlantic Exceptional Family Member Program.*

PEATC’s mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia’s children by working collaboratively with families, schools, and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.

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