

# Ask—Don't Assume

From the [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com) E-Newsletter by Kathie Snow

A hallmark of childhood is curiosity; many children spend many years asking many questions. They want to know “how” and “why” and “when” and more because *they don’t know and they want to know*. As children grow and mature, however, many lose this curiosity. Perhaps this happens because their parents and teachers have shushed them too often; adults may easily tire of children’s curiosity. Or perhaps as children grow, they think asking questions makes them look stupid, so they *pretend* to know even when they don’t. This is very sad. If the flame of curiosity has been extinguished, opportunities to learn are lost, whether one is a child or an adult.

When adults assume a position of authority (at home, as a parent or in a job, as a professional), we may assume a mantle of arrogance: we think we “know” things. The curious child asks questions because she *doesn’t know and she wants to know*, but adults may ask few questions because we think we already know the answers! This is also very sad.

In my article, “Creating Change Through Effective Communication,” I referenced author Wendell Johnson and his recommendation to ask three questions: (1) what do you mean, (2) how do you know, and (3) what next. In this article, I’ll focus on the importance of the first question.

When my son, Benjamin, was very young, he received many pediatric therapies. The physical therapist had spent a great deal of time trying to teach my 18-month-old son to sit up, but it wasn’t happening. At the end of one therapy session, “Cindy” said, “I’m very concerned—if children with cerebral palsy [CP] don’t sit up by the age of two, they never will.” As I carried my son to the car, I was in a panic, thinking: “*Oh, no—this is terrible! What are we going to do?*” But during the drive home, my natural skepticism and common sense kicked in and I wondered how Cindy could *know* this. She had been a PT for less than two years, so she couldn’t know this from her own personal experience. Had a professor told her

this? Had someone studied *all* children with CP *from the beginning of time*? I thought not. And what if my son wasn’t *able* to sit up until he was three; should we then tell him, “No way, buddy—you missed the deadline, so we won’t *let* you sit up!” I began to question the validity of her statement. At the time, I didn’t know to ask, “What do you mean,” or the other questions Johnson recommends. But this experience reinforced the value of skepticism and I *did* begin to question more. (See my article, “The Value of Being a Skeptic.”) If I *had* asked Cindy, “What do you mean,” she may have admitted she was sharing her opinion or something a teacher told her, but that it wasn’t the truth with a capital T.

A couple of years later, I had the incredible experience of being a participant in Partners in Policymaking, an extraordinary leadership development program ([www.partnersinpolicymaking.com](http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com)), where I learned life-changing lessons from the instructors and the adults with disabilities who were my classmates. They helped me learn to really listen and to not assume I knew what someone meant. I needed to ask, “What do you mean,” in order to truly understand. (Herb Lovett’s book, *Learning to Listen*, was also very helpful.)

Several years passed, and my son entered kindergarten. He was in a general ed classroom, just like all the other students with disabilities, at a wonderful, inclusive school. Benj was using a manual wheelchair, a walker, and other assistive devices. Our “rule” for Benjamin (with support from the principal and staff) was that other children should be Benj’s first source of assistance; adults should help only if the task was something a child could not do. Thus, classmates helped push him up the ramp, picked things up that he dropped, and much more. It worked out great for everyone, and Benj has so many “helpers” that he almost needed to beat them off with a stick!

One day, he came from school and said he wished there was someone else at school who used a

**Ask questions from your heart and you will be answered from the heart.**

*Proverb of the Omaha Tribe*

## 2 - Ask—Don't Assume

wheelchair. What was my first reaction? Probably the same as yours: that my son must be feeling bad about himself, being the only child in the school who used a mobility device. My knee-jerk reaction was to give him a hug and talk about it. But by now I was more in the habit of asking, “What do you mean,” and that’s what I did. When you ask this question, the person doesn’t parrot the exact words; he rephrases it, helping you better understand.

In this case, I needed to ask, “What do you mean,” several times before I felt sure I understood. Each time I asked, Benjamin’s answers became more detailed. After our back-and-forth, Benjamin’s meaning was clear as a bell, and I was astounded at how wrong my initial assumption was!

Here’s what my son explained: he saw how much joy the other children experienced when helping him (because he used a wheelchair), so Benj wished there was another child who used a wheelchair so *he* could help that child. My initial assumption was wrong, wrong, wrong, wasn’t it? And what a terrible, awful, no-good mistake I would have made if I had a talk with him based on my erroneous, initial assumption: I would have put ideas in his head that could have caused him great harm! (FYI, the next day, Benj and I talked to his teacher about ways he could help other kids in his class; reciprocity is important to ensure people with disabilities are not just recipients of help.)

Consider the following tale you’ve probably heard, but may have forgotten or haven’t realized its importance in your everyday interactions. A young child asks his mom, “Where did I come from?” The mom takes a deep breath, asks her child to sit down, and delivers the “birds-and-the-bees” talk. At the end of the mother’s spiel, the child looks perplexed. The mom asks if her child has any questions, and the child says, “Not really. It’s just that Tommy said he came from Chicago, so I was wondering where I came from.” Badda-bing, badda-boom!

If the mom had *first* asked, “What do you mean,” her son would have provided the information he ultimately gave, and the mom could have said, “Oh, you came from Los Angeles.” And that would have been the end of it, for the time being.

Asking, instead of assuming, is important in *all* areas of our life. How many times have two people (husband and wife, parent and child, boss and employee, etc.) had an argument (including anger, tears, accusations, and more) because one person misunderstood the other? Within the disability arena, the same could be true between parents and educators in the IEP process, between a staff member and a person with a disability, and so on. How many problems have been *created*, how many relationships have soured, etc., because of miscommunication?

Beyond using the What-Do-You-Mean technique, asking questions—instead of assuming—can help reduce the risk of children and/or adults with disabilities acquiring “learned helplessness.” With the best of intentions, too many of us do too much for people with disabilities. We may assume a person can’t do this-or-that, or think we can do it faster or better. These actions can reflect paternalism and prejudice—we’re *presuming incompetence*, instead of competence. Instead of assuming a person with a disability automatically needs help with this-or-that, let’s ask, first.

Asking, not assuming, could make all the difference within the world of services—special ed, adult services, voc-rehab, and more—and when writing plans/programs. For example, do we ask a student and/or her parents about the student’s abilities and interests, what goals she wants to achieve, and more, before writing the IEP? Do we ask similar questions of an adult with a disability before writing his plan/program? Think of other situations...

Asking demonstrates a desire to learn and reflects a genuine interest in the person. If we ask and then listen (*really listen*), imagine what we might discover, and imagine the possibilities for positive outcomes!

**You seldom listen to me,  
and when you do you  
don't hear, and when you  
do hear you hear wrong,  
and even when you hear  
right you change it so fast  
that it's never the same.**

Marjorie Kellogg