

Fact Sheet

The importance of young children asking questions

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As a parent you may feel completely overwhelmed by all the questions that young children ask.

- How do you answer all those questions?
- Should you answer all those questions?
- What sort of questions should you encourage your child to ask?

If you feel constantly bombarded by your toddler or child's questions you aren't alone. Research tells us children can ask their mother or father as many as 23 questions in an hour. That is more questions than a teacher, nurse or doctor would expect in an hour. You may end up being asked more than 300 questions a day by your child.



Children's questions vary from the simple, "What are we going to eat?" to as complicated as, "Where does the sky end?"

Even babies can 'ask' questions by pointing at something new or by looking in a questioning way at their parents.

We know that children's questions become more sophisticated (complicated) as they get older and also that they learn to ask questions in a more successful way.

How can I help my child learn through their questions?

Firstly, think of children's questions as being of different types:

- Questions that children use to learn things or to collect information which helps them understand their world.
- Questions that children use as part of their imagination, a way that helps them think of things that might be possible.

Both these groups of questions are important to help children grow and understand the world around them.

Learning questions might include questions such as:

- Why are some people old?
- Why does a zebra have stripes?
- Why do I have a sister?

For children to learn from these questions they should be given answers that help them understand. This does not mean that you need to know the answers to all their questions but it does mean listening and spending time on the answers. Sometimes saying, "I don't know, let's get a book to find the answer," or "maybe we should ask grandma," or "we could look that up on the computer together," helps them understand that their questions are important and will also increase their knowledge about the world.

The more questions children ask and the more they learn how to answer them the smarter they get at questions. Children slowly learn to ask better and better questions which eventually give them the answers they are looking for more quickly.

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What you use to stimulate (interest) your child in asking questions makes a difference to how complicated the questions are that they ask. For example, children who see a real monkey will ask more complex questions than children who see a drawing of a monkey .

Imagination questions are very special questions that children ask which are imaginative and show that they think about the world in a way that adults have often forgotten to. It is very important to encourage these sorts of questions and not to laugh or think they are 'silly'.

A question like this might be: "I want to swim under water like a dolphin. How can I do that?" or "How can I go and visit Mars?" You can see that these are the types of questions that may once have seemed impossible but are now things that people can or may soon be able to do. They are the questions that have helped people to achieve and invent things. We need to encourage our children to think about and ask these sorts of questions so that they do not believe that every question has a solution but that every question is waiting for a solution.



Imagination questions are the ones that take up the most time because you need to encourage your child to think about solutions and understand that thinking about answers is sometimes even more important than having an answer. It was only by dreaming of going to the moon that people eventually went there.

Helping your child with questions

Most parents don't feel that they need to encourage their children to ask more questions but you may want to help your child ask different sorts of questions. It is also important that children ask questions for learning, not just as a way of getting attention. Ways to encourage questions and thinking include:

- Playing outdoors – this encourages more questions and exploring than watching a screen.
- Encouraging your children to play 'make believe' or 'dress ups.'
- Ask your children 'open ended questions' – this means questions which do not have a simple answer. A closed question is one like – "What colour is the grass?" while an open question is one like – "How can I be stronger?" This second question can mean several things and have different answers, this teaches your child to think more deeply and understand that not all questions have a perfect or simple answer.
- When you and your child read together stop and ask questions about the book and characters. What do you think will happen now? Why do you think the rabbit did that?
- Thinking out loud yourself also sets an example, "What would grandma like for her birthday?" – this encourages discussion and shows your child that you ask questions too.

We welcome further feedback on this brochure as a way of continually improving our service.

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