

Curious about questions



Questions are often a strategy that adults use to both serve and return. Combined with other strategies, using a range of questioning approaches (e.g., yes/no questions, 'wh' questions, how and why, choice and I wonder questions) can keep interactions going. This offers children different opportunities to use, develop, and expand their communication skills (Houen et al., 2022).

Did you know

The most engaging rallies happen when adults use different strategies to respond to a baby or child's turns or cues.

QUESTIONING APPROACHES



YES/NO QUESTIONS

"Is it autumn?"

- typically result in yes/no responses rather than extended talk.



WH QUESTIONS

(WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY OR HOW)

"What season is it now?" or
"What do you know about autumn?"

- can result in one word or longer turns at talk.



"I WONDER..." QUESTIONS

"I wonder what happens outside when it's autumn?"

- work to invite, rather than expect a response.
 - adults are positioned as curious.
 - adults are less likely to judge answers as right or wrong.



CHOICE QUESTIONS

"Do you think it was a bird or a bat?"

- scaffolds a response from a child by providing a choices.
- seeks the child's knowledge or preference.

When questioning, take into consideration a child's contributions, development and communication preferences. While it's important to model more complex questions, some children may not have the language capabilities or confidence to respond to open questions initially. An adult can then modify their question to a choice based or closed question to maintain the interaction.

The diagram shows a sequence of three speech bubbles. The first bubble, on the left, contains an icon of a child and the question: "What would you like for lunch?". The second bubble, in the middle, contains the text "[no response from the child]" and an icon of a child with a sad expression. The third bubble, on the right, contains an icon of an adult and the modified question: "[Adult modifies] Would you like a sandwich or carrot sticks and hummus?".

Tips for using questions

Did you know that:

- most questions asked by adults are closed used to test children's knowledge.
- children may not respond to questions for fear of being judged as 'right' or 'wrong'.
- 'why' questions can be both open- and closed- ended; at times they are challenging for children and can close down an interaction; but at other times 'why' questions can promote children's contributions of their thinking and imagination.

Experiment with questions

- ask genuine questions (those that you don't know the answer to).
- value children's questions by using their questions as a focus for the next turn at talk.
- experiment with using 'open-ended' questions when reading to children (eg. "What do you think might happen next?").
- try to repeat or modify the question, or alternately provide a hint, instead of answering you own question.
- try an 'I wonder...' question, instead of using a 'Wh question'.
- try using statements instead of questions: Instead of "What's that", try "Wow look at the ... (e.g., hairy caterpillar on the tree!)" and pause to wait for a response.

A word of warning

Be careful of rapid-fire question-answer, question-answer, question-answer interactions. These interactions are more like inquisitions than conversation. Please refer to the Keep the Rally going tip sheet for strategies to support sustained interactions with children.

When questions go wrong:

- Sometimes questions can be troublesome for a child when they
 - feel that their knowledge is being tested.
 - don't know the answer.
 - have not heard the question.
 - have not understood the question.
- When questions go wrong you could:
 - try repeating the question.
 - provide a longer pause to allow the child time to respond.
 - experiment with modifying your question. (e.g., if the original question was "what flies in the sky?", you might try "have you ever seen something flying in the sky?")
 - provide a hint. (e.g. "What about something with wings?")
 - encourage consulting with others. (e.g. "How could we find out?", "Who could we ask?")
 - wait for a child's contribution (e.g., a coo, point, word) and add language to model a response.

What about when children ask questions:

Questions that children ask can be used as a catalyst for serve-return-rally interactions. It is important to value and respond to them. By following a child's lead, adults can show children that they value their contributions, knowledge and communication preferences.

