



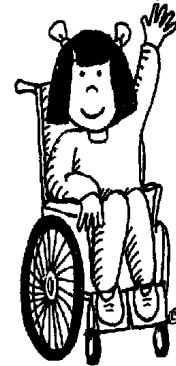
Supporting Early Literacy in Natural Environments

Ages & Stages: Answering Questions

Questions are an important tool for you as a teacher. You may want to check whether children have understood a concept or a direction; you may want to know how children feel about something, or you may want to help them practice language to express their ideas and their thoughts.

Two types of questions: Open and Closed

Questions can be grouped into two main types: open-ended questions and closed questions. Open-ended questions are questions like “What’s happening?” where children get to express their own views and opinions. Closed questions are questions that have only one answer. Like “What color is this?” or “How many apples are there?”. We use both types of questions all the time.



Matching question difficulty to the child’s developmental level

Presenting questions to a child that are too difficult provides the teacher very little useful information and it can be an embarrassment for the child. It is important to choose the right kind of questions for each child, questions that match the child’s level of understanding. This handout provides some information for you and your itinerant teacher to use to discuss different levels of questions and how to best match questions to the different capabilities of the children in your classroom.

From concrete to more abstract

Blank, Rose & Berlin (1978) categorized questions according to levels of complexity from concrete to more abstract. In their system, the closer the teacher’s language is to the present situation, the easier the question.

The Two-year-old Stage: Children with language skills at the 2-year-old-stage can answer questions about the here and now like:

- What’s this?
- What’s the-----doing?
- Yes and no questions (Is that a----?)

The Three-year-old Stage: Children with language skills at this developmental level can answer questions that require descriptive vocabulary and some thinking such as:

- What is happening in this picture?
- Where’s the-----?
- What are----for?
- What color/shape is this?

The Four-to-Five-year-old Stage: Children with language skills at this stage are able to answer questions that require them to evaluate ideas, rethink the situation and take into account aspects that are not directly visible. For example:

- “What do you think will happen next?”
- “How do you think s/he feels?”
- “What is not a food in this picture?”
- “What is a ---?”



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Later they become able to answer more complex types of questions that require thinking beyond the immediate situation. To answer these questions children must be able to think about the future or the past, to interpret events and provide explanations.

- “What will happen if s/he does not----?”
- “Why do you think s/he did that?”
- “How can s/he do that?”
- “When do we -----?”

If a child seems unable to answer a question, how can you change the question to make it easier for the child to understand and respond to? Following are some suggestions:

1. **Rephrase questions to less complex forms by making them more concrete.** *For example: Simplify a question about an inferred feeling “How do you think Little Bear felt about his chair being broken?” to a question about something seen “Look at the tears running down Little Bear’s cheek. What is he doing?”*
2. **Ask questions about personal experiences.** *For example: Simplify a question such as “Why do you think firefighters wear such big heavy coats?” to “What does it feel like when you stand close to a fire?”*
3. **Ask questions about very recent events or objects that are present.** *For example: Simplify a question about a prediction such as “What do you think you will eat at your Thanksgiving dinner?” to a question about an event that just took place like “When we made our soup today, what did we put in it?”.*
4. **Simplify a question or use familiar vocabulary.** *For example: Simplify the question “What kind of instrument is this?” by asking questions that require making a choice such as “Is this a piano or a guitar?”, or try a yes/no answer like “Is this a drum that we hit with a stick?”*
5. **Allow more time for comprehension and responding.** *For example tell the child “I’ll come back to you in a minute. You think about it for a bit.” You can also try asking a peer the same type of question first so that they can provide a model for the child.*

Notes and Plans:

Blank, M.; Rose, S.A.; & Berlin, L.J. (1978). *The language of learning: The preschool years*. Orlando, FL: Grune & Stratton.