

## QUESTIONS – THE KEY TO LEARNING?

### **Questions! Questions! Questions!**

It seems very hard to imagine a world without questions. Asking questions and giving answers is very much a part of the young child's 'every day' life - whilst at home with family, playing with friends or engaging in activities at childcare or preschool.

*"What did you do today?"      "What colour is that?"*

*"Do you want to play chasey?"      "Can I play with you?"*

*"Did you remember to clean your teeth?"      "Would you like a story before you go to sleep?"*

These kinds of questions smooth the path for our social interactions and expectations both within the home and outside. When we ask questions it helps us to think and learn about the world and the people around us. Young children begin to understand and ask questions at an early age.

As learners we ask questions to find out information or to clarify the understanding that we have already established. Questions also enable us to link our ideas and think about issues in relation to each other, thus leading to an understanding of "the big picture". Another important role of questions is to establish what has been carried out or to check what has been understood. When taking the role of the 'teacher', whether it be as a parent, a friend, a carer or an educator, we also use our own questions to promote the listener's curiosity, thinking and motivation to learn more.

The transition to school includes children becoming familiar with the question and answer routine of the classroom, where the teacher asks questions and the children answer. Some children will take longer than their peers to adjust to this. Gradually children will learn when it is appropriate to ask questions themselves and what sort of questions to ask. They will also understand the often unspoken rules such as how long you may talk when answering a question and allowing others to have their turn to ask or answer. Having "learned" the rules with one particular teacher in one grade, the students will need to "re-learn" them when moving to the next grade with a new teacher.

### **What sort of questions can we ask?**

There are many different types of questions, each serving a different role in our interactions. Some questions seek factual information, others only demand a 'yes or a no' answer. Other questions are described as more 'open ended' probing the listener's thoughts, opinions and feelings about a particular matter. Teachers also ask questions for a wide variety of reasons - to check knowledge, to lead students to clarify statements or form a conclusion, to maintain order or to introduce new ideas.

Different types of questions are not 'good' or 'bad' - there is a time and a place for each type. What is important is to be aware that there are different types of questions and to use a **variety** of question types as we interact with young children.

Consider the following questions. Why might they have been asked and what is likely to be the nature of the response.

*What are the main ingredients of anzac biscuits?*

*Who is the Prime Minister of Australia?*

*Do snakes have legs?*

*Do you like Brussels sprouts?*

*Where might you look for information about bees?*

*Why do dogs wear collars?*

*What changes might you make to the zoo if you were in charge? "*

*If you were a policeman what do you think would be the best part about the job?*

*How would you decide which belongings to take if your house was burning down?*

*How do you think we should treat old people in our community?*

Many questions begin with a 'wh' word, such as what, who, where, when and why. Whilst children must learn to ask these types of questions, it is important not to focus solely on such question 'starter words'. It is often the words immediately following that will determine the type of question and the complexity of the response that is stimulated.

Note in the above examples, the role of the underlined words *might*, *should* and *think* in stimulating the expression of opinion. Beginning a question with the word *if* will encourage imaginative thinking. Observe also the different nature of the two questions beginning with the word *what*.

There is a group of verbs known as cognitive or 'thinking' verbs that describe the unseen actions of our brain. Examples include, *think, imagine, remember, decide, wish, know, believe, hope*. When words such as these are included in the questions we ask, we are encouraging a move towards stimulating, longer and more complex responses.

### **Some potential pitfalls for "Questions in the classroom."**

The question-answer routine common to many classroom interactions consists of a teacher led question followed by a response from a selected student followed by some sort of evaluation of this response. Whilst all teachers try to avoid restrictive stilted question answer routine where knowledge is tested rather than explored and extended, it can be difficult. Research of

classroom interaction shows that in many classrooms we can hear a large number of factual recall or memory questions. In addition teachers often ask questions with a specific answer in mind. Unfortunately the nature and number of such questions tend to limit the length and complexity of student's responses and restrict the students' engagement in the lesson.

Experienced teachers aim to employ a wide range of questions and balance the information and recall questions with more open-ended questions that probe the students' opinion, ideas and experience. This approach requires teachers to consciously examine their teaching style and techniques of classroom management. Teachers' beliefs about their role and the capabilities of their students will also influence their use of questions in the classroom. It has been said, that it is this "classroom climate", that is the key variable in how much learning takes place through questions.

Good teachers also consider the cognitive demands of their questions and match the questions with the abilities of their students. Many teachers are using the framework provided in the writing of Marion Blank or Bloom's Taxonomy to guide them in the types and levels of questions that they might employ when working with students of diverse ability levels.

### **Interactive teaching**

Research has also indicated that it is a more **interactive style of teaching** that best promotes student learning. This style is rather like a combination of instruction and conversation. Two quotes from the ERIC website describe this.

"Strategically the teacher questions, prods, challenges, coaxes, or keeps quiet, providing clarification and instruction when necessary, without wasting time or words."

"A ... teacher does not provide step by step instruction designed to produce right answers or correct performance. Rather, the teacher encourages expression of students' own ideas, builds on information students provide and generally guides students to increasingly sophisticated levels of comprehension."

### **Wait Time**

Research has shown that if teachers wait for 3-5 seconds after asking their students a question, there are positive outcomes for all students. Students gave longer and more complex responses, gained confidence, communicated with their peers more and asked more questions. In addition, the teachers found it easier to ask probing questions and increased their expectations of their students, particularly of the lower achieving ones (Rowe 1987). It seems everyone benefited from the opportunity to have extra thinking time and there are obvious implications for increasing 'wait time' in other settings.

Parents can also be made aware of the importance of allowing time for their children to both process the question and formulate their responses. Combining increased 'wait time' with

genuine interest in what the children are saying will improve the quality and the length of adult - child interactions.

### **Children asking the questions**

- It is important to teach young children how to ask questions.
- We can model the sorts of questions that promote reflection, reasoning and imagination.
- We can also show children how to use "self questioning". Asking yourself questions about your thinking or behaviour helps to solve problems and develop self control.
- Questions also play an important role in the comprehension of what we read.

### **But what about comments?**

Some children respond to an adult's questions with apprehension or withdrawal. Perhaps they perceive questions as a threat or feel that they are being put to the test. These children may not have had the experience of a relaxed dialogue in which questions allow them to express their opinions and ideas.

Remember that comments can work as well as questions to stimulate children's participation in conversation. For example, when building with blocks, you might comment on what you think will happen to the tall building, or describe the blocks that you used to have when you were a child or verbalize what you want to build next. Children will contribute more as they experience an atmosphere of patience and acceptance.

**Questions!** The more you think about them, the more useful they can be!

### **References and Resources**

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