

Using Questions to Support Your Child's Learning

Curiosity is the key to learning, and questions are one of the most powerful tools for helping your child's thinking skills.

Why Are Questions Important for Learning?

When your child asks a question, they are taking an active role in their own learning. They are trying to figure out how their world works by seeking information. As they ask questions, they are developing critical *thinking skills* that build brain power.

Asking questions is also an important form of *communication*. Your child is seeking out a knowledgeable person—you, another child, a family member or caregiver—and requesting information that they need or want.

Can Babies and Toddlers Ask Questions Before They Can Use Words?

As children get older—usually starting at about 2 ½ to three years—they will use language to ask questions. But there are many *other ways* to ask questions that don't require words.

A baby or toddler may be asking a question when they:

- Looks closely at an interesting object or person
- Reaches for an object or person
- Points to something
- Touches something
- Looks at you with a questioning facial expression

When a young child asks a question without using words, first say the question or questions you *think* they might be asking out loud: "Are you trying to tell me you don't like the sound of the fire engine and you want me to pick you up?" Adults have to *imagine being the child for a moment and wonder what questions they may have*. When you say those questions out loud, you help your child develop language skills.

What Questions Do Children Ask From Birth to Three?

The types of questions that children ask (using words) will change as they develop. Below you will find a timeline for the ages at which you can generally expect children to ask the what, where, when, who, and why questions. Note that young children's verbal skills develop at different rates. Any consistent sound a child uses for an object or person (like "baba" for bottle) is considered a "word".

Ages and Asking

21-24 months: Asks, "What's that?" (Or simply, "Dat?")

25-28 months: Asks questions with rising intonation

26-32 months: Asks *where* questions

36-40 months: Asks *who* questions

37-42 months: Asks "Is...?" and "Do...?" questions

42-49 months: Asks *when, why, and how* questions

What Should I Do When My Baby or Toddler Asks a Question?

Of course it's important to respond to a child's question; but avoid the temptation to jump right in and answer it. Why? Because your child then misses out on the chance to use his own thinking skills to figure the answer out themselves, with your support.

Here are some examples of how you might respond to your child's questions that encourage them to use their thinking:

Offer an opportunity or experience in response to the question.

Nico, age 6 months, is looking at the bright orange dish towel sitting on the counter. He looks at his mother and then back to the towel. His mother says, "Do you want the dish towel? Would you like to touch it?" She hands Nico the dish towel and he takes it with both hands, brings it up to his face, and rubs it on his cheek. His mother says, "How does it feel? Is it soft or a little rough?"

Nico's mother offered him the opportunity to explore and learn about the object he was "asking" about.

Suggest a new way to explore in response to the question.

Carla, aged 18 months, was trying to figure out how to open the drawer of the toy cash register. She was pushing on the drawer and shaking the cash register. She turned to her child care provider and said, "Hep." Her child care provider responded by saying, "Are you asking for help opening the drawer?" She then pointed to a button on the cash register and said, "Can you push the big red button? See what that does."

Providing guidance to Carla gives her the chance to discover the answer to her own question.

Ask a question in response—for children aged 30 months and older.

Alan, aged 36 months, was fascinated with a large machine at the building supply store. He asked his mother, "What dis?" She replied, "That's a forklift. What is it doing?" Alan watched for a while and then said, "Boxes go up!"

Asking Alan a question encouraged him to take an active role in his own learning.