

# Teaching Your Child How to Answer Questions

Often, parents express their concerns with the fact that their child is struggling with answering questions. There are so many steps to actually learning and understanding questions of which we, as adults, are not aware, as we naturally learned this skill when we were younger. This skill is such a difficult one for typically developing children to learn (let alone children with various diagnoses), we first need to talk about the process of understanding what questions actually are before we learn how to teach the skill.

## *Process of Understanding and Answering Questions:*

### 1. A Questions Requires a Response:

For every child (no matter what diagnosis), the first thing we need to teach a child is that when they hear this question word (Who, What, Where, When, Why, How, Do, Does, Can) at the beginning of a sentence which ends with a raised pitch, it is a question and does require a response.

- The most basic way to do this is to say “I asked you a question, you need to try and answer me” (then repeat the question again).
- With Y/N questions you can prompt your child to answer with one of those words. Ex. “I asked you a question and you need to tell me ‘Yes or NO’” (and ask the question again).
- All we are looking for is a response (doesn't have to be a correct response). If your child responds with echolalia (as children with receptive language deficits, developmental delays, ASD, and many, many other diagnoses will respond to questions this way), repeating the last word/few words you just said, your child has already *mastered this concept*. Great! Move on to step 2.

### 2. Every question word means something different:

The next step is to teach a child what each question word means. We don't do this all at once but rather systematically by targeting one question word at a time. (This will be further explained in Step 3.)

So what does each question word mean? (Taking a trip back to Grammar 101)

- **“What”:** means a *person, place, or thing* (for younger children (PK age) I explain that “what means a person, an animal, or an object”, place is something I introduce later with “where”).
- **“Where”:** means a *place*.
- **“Who”:** means a *person* (or an animal).
- **“Why”:** is a *cause to an effect*. (even for typically developing children, this cause and effect concept is extremely difficult to express so I don't expect children to begin to answer this question until approximately 4 years of age)

- **“When”**: is a *time*. (Time concepts are very, very hard for younger children. In my experience some children don’t understand concepts of time (yesterday, today, tomorrow) until Kindergarten.)
- **“How”**: is a *process*. (Answering this kind of question it typically the last skill to develop as children need to understand ALL the above question concepts to answer “how” something happened. Children in Kindergarten struggle with this skill as well.)

### 3. Teach the skill:

- Unless a child is showing me that they understand one question word as compared to another, I follow the sequence of most simple/concrete questions to most abstract:
  - Beginning with: what, where who, when, why, how

#### **Begin with ONLY one type of question**

- As previously stated I usually begin with “what” questions because they are the most concrete questions to teach and understand

#### · **Use visual cues and concrete questions:**

- **Pointing/showing**: is the most basic concrete cue.

§ **Object Labels (names)**: Ex. “What are you playing with?” (pointing to the object in a child’s hand), “What am I playing with?” (showing object in your hand). By using these cues you are teaching your child that the answer to this simple question it to use the object label (name).

§ **Action Labels (verbs)**: Once a child has mastered the “what” questions that refer to object labels with concrete objects I introduce questions that refer to the actions of objects. Ex. “What are you doing with your car?” (driving), “What is mommy doing with these dishes?” (washing), etc.

§ **Accept the most basic single word answers and echo/expand on them**: As a technique introduce in a previous blog the “echo/expansion” technique is a great way to encourage correct answers your child give you while expanding upon their answers. *Don’t necessarily expect them to repeat your expanded answer. You are just modeling more language for them.* Don’t forget to encourage their answer.

- Adult: “What are you doing with your car?”
- Child: “Driving.”
- Adult: “Yes, you *are* driving! Driving up the ramp.”

§ If their answer is incorrect, no attention is brought to the incorrect answer but you do model the correct answer for them.

- Adult: “What are you doing with your car?”
- Child: “car.”
- Adult: “You are driving. Driving the car.”

○ **Looking/gesturing:** once a child can answer questions about the concrete objects and actions they are doing, you can move to asking these same pictures about (which is still a concrete question but more abstract than if you had the objects directly in front of you). As your child understands questions about object and actions labels you can alternate these types of questions when looking at book.

§ Adult: “What does the girl have?”

§ Child: “Ball.”

§ Adult: “Yes she does have a ball. What is she doing with the ball?”

§ Child: “Kick,”

§ Adult: “You are right! The girl is kicking the ball. Great job.”

○ **Picture paired with question word:**

§ Sometimes children do a great job answering concrete questions but once you take away the object/picture they struggle with answering a question because their “visual cue” is gone.

§ One way I attempt encourage generalization is to use a picture cue during the above two steps in order to give provide a visual cue once the object is removed.

§ *Use the visual cues work for your child* (here are some examples):

· ASL signs of “what, where, when, why, how” (can find on internet)

· The words “what, where, when, why, how” printed out separately on different colored pieces of paper

· Other pictures: you can find great pictures on the internet to represent each question word.

· **Moving to more abstract questions:**

○ When it is time to move from concrete questions about objects and pictures in books to more abstract questions, I continue to the use the picture cues I have paired with the question word to facilitate carryover.

○ **Asking questions immediately after:**

§ Immediately after playing with object or looking at book, take away the object/book and ask the SAME questions.

§ Ex. Adult: “What *were* you just playing with?”

Child: “Car”

Adult: “Yes, you were playing with the car!” (now showing the object). *If question is answered incorrectly show the object and state* “You were playing with the ball.”

§ Ex. Adult: “What was the girl doing in the picture?”

Child: “Play with ball.”

Adult: “Yes the girl was kicking the ball!”

○ **Asking questions after a delay:**

§ The next step is to remove the objects/book you were looking at and wait about 30 seconds, and ask the same questions.

○ **Expand the delay:**

§ Continue to expand the delays, 5 minutes, 10 minutes, and 15 minutes and so on, while playing with other toys.

§ Ex. Adult: “What were we playing with before the guitar?”

Child: “Car”

Adult: “Yes we were playing with the car before we started playing with the guitar!”

○ **Introduce sequencing words:**

§ Now you can introduce sequencing words, such as “this morning, afternoon, yesterday” etc. These are very difficult concepts for ANY child! Will take lots of practice to understand concepts of time.

○ **Using a calendar/picture schedule to aid in recall and sequencing:**

§ Many times children cannot recall what they did (yesterday, today, this morning, etc.), but if we give them a visual cue they can be successful answering these questions.

§ You will see preschool teachers using these types of picture calendars to remind their students what they did in school so parents will know the events of the day.

§ Some parents use pictures on a calendar or color code days on a calendar. Maybe you went to the story time at the library yesterday, so you have a picture of a book on the calendar and you point to it when you ask “What did we do yesterday?” or “Where did we go yesterday?”

§ If you want a child to recall events they participated in during one day, I recommended some type of visual/picture calendar for that day.

· You can begin with the most simple type (what you did this morning, this afternoon) and have two pictures “book” for story time in the AM and “store” picture for trip to the grocery store in the PM.

· Or you can put a picture for various activities throughout the day.

· Either way you create your visual calendar/schedule, you want to refer to it when asking your child these questions of time so they are successful.

· Eventually you will be able to ask them what this did this

· Then one day, you will realize they just answered your question without needing to look at the calendar!!!!

· When that happens your child will be able to begin to tell you things/events that happened to them during the times you were NOT with them.

## Things to remember when you are working with your child:

As one can see, teaching the skill of answering questions is *involved and extensive* and it is truly amazing that any of us actually learn such a difficult skill at such a young age. Although examples are based on “What” questions, one would follow the same sequence when teaching each question word. Just a few things to remember:

1. Meet your child where they are. Your child needs to be able to answer concrete questions before he can answer abstract ones; he needs to be able to label objects and actions before he can answer questions about them.
  2. Goal: Success regardless of use of scaffolding. This means, provide as many cues as your child needs to be successful. You can always fade out cues later on.
  3. Mastery at concrete level is indication that next question word can be introduced: You don’t have to wait until your child can answer “what” questions about things that happened “yesterday” before you introduce “where” questions. If a child can answer “what” questions about real objects and pictures in books, you can begin to introduce the next question word at the most concrete level.
  4. Stick to age norms: Keep in mind that if the skill is **not** age-appropriate, you can introduce it with the goal of modeling but don’t expect your child to answer these questions correctly. Example, a three year old is NOT going to be able to answer “when, how” questions b/c they don’t have a concept of time.
  5. "Which" question not included: As you may have noticed I did not include the question word "which" in the above model. This question word tends to develop outside of the typical model above. Once children understand how to make choices between objects you can introduce "which" immediately ("Which one do you want?"). Most of the time children develop understanding of this question word very quickly. However, if your child is struggling with this concept, feel free to use the above techniques to facilitate understanding and language growth.
  6. Praise and Reinforcement: Don’t forget to praise your child’s ATTEMPTS. It doesn’t matter if the responses are correct or not, it matters that your child is participating in the process. The more excited you are, the more willing your child will be to participate.
  7. Give yourselves the credit you deserve and have realistic expectations. Learning how to answer questions is SO difficult that it takes typically developing children years to do it. If you have been working with your child and he/she can answer ANY question (no matter how concrete), give yourself a pat on the back! You have just “moved a mountain” and you need to celebrate *your* success along with your child’s. Remember it is a *long* process and won’t happen overnight. When your child is an adult, no one will care that it took him a year to answer the question “What are you doing?”. They will only care that he *can* answer it!
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