

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Questions and answers Jennie Lindon

What? Why? When? Where? What for? – and Why? yet again. Sometimes children's questions just keep on coming. It can be wearing, especially if you are tired or very sure you have already answered as best you can. But it is well worth the effort to listen and answer properly. Children's questions, and their comments, are the sounds of their thinking. They provide you with an opportunity to actually hear their thoughts. Young children learn many ways to use their skills of language – and asking questions is a good one.

The first questions

If all is going well, young children learn to talk within their second year. This exciting development opens up their social world as much as learning to walk stretches what their bodies can do. At first, toddlers mainly learn the names of familiar objects and people. They also imitate little phrases that we hardly know we say so often! You might hear 'Ohdearyme' and 'Heylookadat' echoing back at you in a toddler voice.

Once toddlers are confident that everything and everybody has a name, then they ask their first questions. They can go for the 'What is it?' question with an enquiring look or might firmly point a finger to say very clearly what they want. Soon they grasp the question format in words, with 'Wassat?' (What's that?) and 'Whoozat?' (Who's that?). They even learn to imitate how the tone of your voice changes when you ask a question.

It is important that toddlers get a friendly response to these early questions. Keep going, even if you seem to answer the same question several times.

- Toddlers are stocking up information through their question and answer session. They need to see important adults as patient people who can help improve their knowledge.
- You know that every cup in your home is called a 'cup'. Toddlers do not know that yet. And

every book is called a 'book', even though the cover, the inside and the story you read are all different.

- Keep your answers simple so that toddlers can easily link words like 'apple' or 'cat' to the correct object. Don't be surprised if for a while they think that any furry four-legged animal is a cat and any round fruit is an apple. Once children get the hang of the power of questions, they ask a wide range. Responses to them will of course vary according to the question.

Enquiring questions

Sometimes children's questions are direct and simple to answer, such as, 'When is lunch ready?' But even this question probably needs a bit more than just, 'In five minutes'. A young child will not understand what five minutes means. You might say, 'You've just got time to wash your hands' or 'Now would be a good time to lay the table, if you'd like to help me.'

Children need to be curious to keep learning. Some exploration about 'what?' and 'how?' will be through their hands-on play. But sometimes curiosity has to be satisfied through conversation.

Children need to feel confident that adults are interested in their concerns. Then they will ask the most interesting questions. Three and four year olds have been known to ask questions like, 'How do you get a rainbow?', 'Why don't worms have any legs?', 'Where does the water go from our toilet?' or 'How does our cake get big in the oven?' You will help young children by listening and giving a proper answer.

- Sometimes you will be able to reply to their question, because you know the answer. Keep the reply simple, a couple of sentences at most. Then children will ask some more if they wish – now or at another time. If you go on too much, their interest will run out before you have finished. They will probably just wander off.

- Of course, you do not have to know everything, but helpful adults know how to find out. You might say, 'I think that ...' or 'I don't know' and then say, 'I think we've got a book with pictures about ...' or 'I bet there'll be a book in the library', and plan to look on your next visit.
- Sometimes, you can admire the child, saying, 'That's a good question. I've never thought to ask that. I think it works this way ...' Or follow up with a linked question of your own like, 'What do you think will happen if we ...?' or 'I wonder how he felt when ...?' (in a story you read to children).

If you can, it's a good idea to keep a note of children's questions and their age when they asked. A simple diary is helpful to share if you look after other people's children. Children's questions show a lot about how they understand the world, as well as what puzzles or worries them. And children will be intrigued by anecdotes about their younger selves later on in childhood.

Challenging questions

Some questions have a built-in challenge, or they may feel that way to you. Children ask, 'Do I really have to ...?' and 'Why can't I ...?' You need to answer this question with more than 'Yes' or 'Because I say so'. You may be able to explain and offer some compromise, such as, 'Yes, you do need to tidy up your books. But I will help you.' If you tell children that they cannot do something, then they deserve a simple and honest explanation.

Some challenges from children may be fair enough, but come with extras because they are delivered loudly when others can hear. A child may announce in an older child's school play, 'When can we go? I'm bored!' You can reasonably say, 'Please speak quietly. It will hurt the children's feelings to hear you say that.' But you may need to admit, 'I know it's been a very

long sit. Would you be happier on my lap?’ A favourite, quiet toy or a snack may be helpful in this situation.

Uncomfortable questions

Children’s skill in asking questions zooms ahead of their understanding of what other people might think or feel. They also take time to develop volume control. A question that feels fine just between you and the children can feel uncomfortable in public. You may feel your face warming up as, ‘Why are they called nipples?’ is followed by, ‘Has everybody got nipples? Has the Queen got them? How do you know?’

- Deal with the volume control by reminding a child, ‘I am close to you. You don’t need to be so loud’. You can back up your words with a hand gesture that mimics coming down a bit.
- Answer fair questions at the time, if you can. If you feel uneasy, then call a temporary halt with, ‘I’ve said enough about nipples in front of people I don’t know. We’ll continue this conversation at home.’
- Avoid assuming that children have set out to make you feel embarrassed. It is very unlikely that young children will plot in this way.
- Some questions can make you feel uneasy because you are more aware than young children of other people’s feelings, including your own.
- Avoid telling children bluntly that they are ‘rude’ or ‘shouldn’t talk about things like that’.
- The pronouncement of, ‘Why has that lady got such a fat tummy?’ can be met with a quiet, ‘It’s not polite to talk about people we don’t know.’ Explain later to the child that the lady may be expecting a baby but may simply be a ‘big lady’.
- Adults are often wary about the question ‘Where do babies come from?’ But it can be harder to deal honestly with children’s questions about death or serious illness. Some young children ask questions like, ‘It’s only very old people who die, isn’t it? Little children don’t die?’ Be honest about the facts, ‘Most

people live to a grand old age. But I’m sorry to say that even little children sometimes get so ill that they cannot get better.’

Why our responses matter

Sometimes you will be busy and you do not hear a child’s question or miss the beginning. Try to get the moment back with, ‘Sorry, you were asking me about ...’

Sometimes it is hard to understand exactly what young children want to know. You can help them ask the right questions by being clear about what you say. For instance, if you need a child to repeat something because you didn’t hear it, then say so clearly. But if you are puzzled, say that you don’t understand. This will help children learn that these words mean ‘Please tell me in a different way’. Sometimes you need to say, ‘Can you show me?’ or try, ‘Do you mean ...?’

Confident children can then say to adults or other children, ‘No, that’s not what I meant’ or ‘What I want to know is ...’

Finally it is worth watching out for the balance with your own questions. Unless it is part of a game, children find it boring when adults ask lots of testing questions like, ‘What colour is it?’ You know the answer and are asking only to find out if the children know.

Young children need adults who ask plenty of genuine questions, when you really want to hear the answer and the children can tell you because they know and you do not.

Questions and answers

Useful publications

Cath Arnold (2003) *observing Harry: child development and learning 0-5*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Jacqui Cousins (2003) *Listening to four year olds*, London: National Children’s Bureau.

Jennie Lindon (2006) *Care and caring matter – young children learning through care*, London: Early Education.

Jennie Lindon (2008) *What does it mean to be one (two, three, four, five)*, a set of five books, London: Practical Pre-School Books.

Jennie Lindon (2011) *Too safe for their own good?* London: National Children’s Bureau

Diane Rich (2002) *More than words: children developing communication, language and literacy*, London: Early Education.

Barbara Tizard & Martin Hughes (2002) *Young children learning*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Blackwell.

Useful contacts

Family Information Service (FIS) – your local FIS will be able to let you know of services dealing with this subject, whether provided through Sure Start, a children’s centre, family centre or other organisation. For details of how to contact your FIS, visit Childcare Link: www.childcarelink.gov.uk

Fathers Direct: www.fathersdirect.com

National Family and Parenting Institute: www.nfpi.org.uk

Parentline Plus: helpline 0800 800 2222; www.parentlineplus.org.uk

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Early Education

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Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children’s development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children’s behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

