

Curious About Questions?

Oral language is embedded across the Early Years Learning Framework and is central to educator's work. Asking questions is a common approach to prompting children's talk and participation in conversations, however not all questions are equal. This tip sheet explains question qualities and describes what you can do when the questions you ask are 'tricky' for children aged 2-5 years.

Question qualities

Questions can be closed- or open- ended. Closed-ended questions require a child to produce a narrow response or an answer that the educator is looking for. Open-ended questions invite a range of answers and usually prompt a longer conversation. Regardless of the type of question, educator's responses are pivotal in sustaining rich back and forth interactions.

Research has shown that educators use three main question types in their interactions with children:



Yes/no questions

e.g. "Is it autumn?"

- Typically result in yes/no responses rather than extended talk

Wh questions (who, what, where, when, why or How)

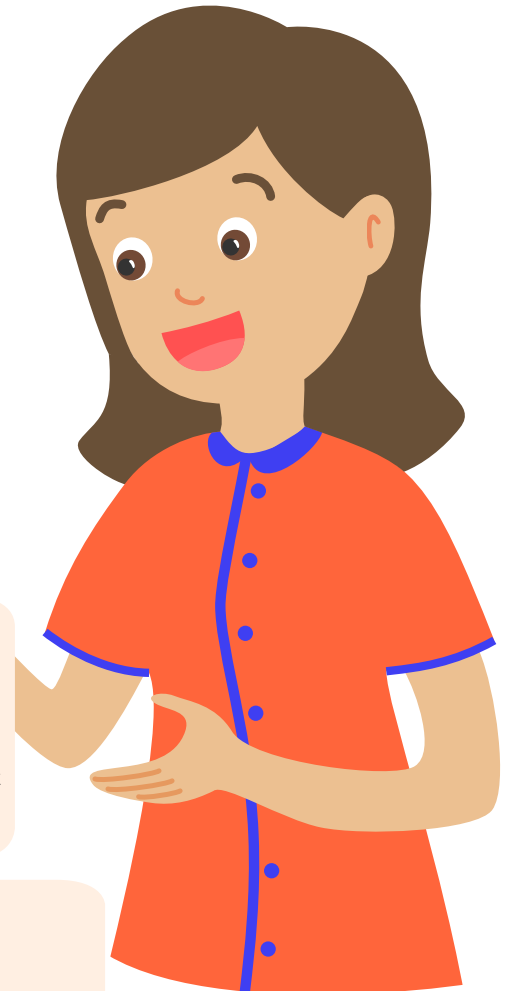
e.g. "What season is it now?" or "What do you know about autumn?"

- Can result in one word or longer turns at talk
- Are often used to 'test' knowledge

"I wonder..." questions

e.g. "I wonder what happens outside when it's autumn?"

- Work to invite, rather than expect, a response
- Educators are positioned as curious
- Educators are less likely to judge answers and right or wrong



Experiment with questions

- Ask genuine questions (those that you don't know the answer to)
- Try using statements instead of questions: Instead of "What's that", try "Wow look at the ... (eg. hairy caterpillar on the tree!)" and pause to wait for a response.
- Value children's questions by using their questions as a focus for the next turn at talk.
- Experiment with using 'open-ended' questions when reading to children (eg. "What do you think might happen next?")
- Try to repeat or modify the question, or alternately provide a hint, instead of answering your own question.
- Try an 'I wonder...' question, instead of using a 'Wh question'.



Tips for using questions

Did you know that:

- Most questions asked by educators are closed-questions used to test children's knowledge.
- Children may not respond to questions for fear of being judged as 'right' or 'wrong'.
- 'Why' questions can be both open- and closed- ended; at times they are challenging for children and can close down a conversation; but at other times 'why' questions can promote children's contributions of their thinking and imagination.
- Sometimes questions go wrong.

Sometimes questions can be troublesome for a child when they:



Not a recipe but an experiment... The strategies described in this tip sheet are 'something to experiment with' and tools in your interaction toolkit to be drawn upon at suitable times. Understanding how questions work can help you to select those most appropriate for achieving your teaching goals.



A word of warning

Be careful of rapid-fire question-answer, question-answer, question-answer interactions. These interactions are more like inquisitions than conversation. Please refer to *Keeping the Conversation Going* tip sheet for strategies to support extended conversations with children.

What About When Children Ask Questions?

Questions that children ask can be used as a catalyst for rich conversations. It is important to value and respond to them! By following a child's lead, educators can improve the power imbalances that are typical in educator-child interactions. Following a child's lead can also help to create more conversational talk rather than a classroom dominated by educator talk.



Experiment with Responses

- **Avoid answering your own question** when children show you that your question is tricky.
- **Try repeating the question.**
- **Providing a longer pause** to allow the child to respond.
- **Experiment with modifying your question.** E.g. if the original question was "what flies in the sky?", you might try "have you ever seen something flying in the sky?"
- **Provide a hint.** E.g. "What about something with wings?"
- **Encourage consulting with others.** E.g. "How could we find out?", "Who could we ask?"

Key references

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