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## FEATURE

# Ask a question: What kind of answer?

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“What do you need to plant a pecan tree?” asks the visiting county extension agent, as he speaks to the class of 5-year-olds.

Several children wave their hands furiously, eager to talk. When called on, Johnny says, “My grandmother has a pecan tree at her house, and we like to pick the pecans.”



Undoubtedly, you’ve had a similar experience: You ask a question, and instead of answering it, a child gives a comment or makes a statement. Telling the difference between a question and a comment can be hard for some children.

### Why does it matter?

Recognizing questions and responding appropriately is important for engaging in conversation and expanding knowledge. Questions can stimulate a child’s curiosity about a subject and focus attention. Recognition of questions and appropriate responses become increasingly important as children enter primary school.

Questions are also important for teachers. We ask questions to determine children’s interests, discover a child’s feelings, and get information about the child’s family and culture. We ask questions to learn whether children comprehend major concepts in a curriculum unit and ultimately whether we have been effective in teaching.

### Questions for toddlers

In caring for toddlers, we may bombard them with questions without being aware of what we are doing. “Want more milk?” “Are your pants wet?” With questions like these, we may not expect an answer or be satisfied with a simple yes or no. Often

children will respond by nodding or shaking their heads.

Experienced teachers know, however, that as toddlers grow toward independence, they may respond in the negative to nearly every adult suggestion. To avoid conflicts and encourage toddlers to behave in a positive way, we give them choices. Of course, for this technique to work for us, both choices must be acceptable. We might ask, for example, “Do you want applesauce or a banana?” or “Do you want to dress the doll in red socks or green socks?” Either choice is OK. At this stage, a child may answer by pointing or gesturing.

With practice, children can begin to recognize and respond appropriately to “what,” “who,” and “where” questions. We may ask: “What’s that?” as we point to a ball; “Who’s that?” as we point to a picture of Daddy, and “Where’s the kitty?” as we put a stuffed animal under a blanket.

When children respond with verbal answers, we



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can encourage further responses with positive acknowledgement. “Yes, that’s a ball!” “Right! He’s your daddy.” “Good! The kitty is under here.” If a child does not respond using words, we can model an answer using words. We can also offer a cue, such as “Is this your mommy or your daddy?” or “Is the kitty hiding under something?”

## Questions for preschoolers

By about age 3, children can begin to answer questions about themselves, such as “What’s your name?” and “How old are you?”

By this time, children may recognize our quizzical facial expressions as we ask questions. They may also hear our inflection—that is, the way the voice may rise at the end of a question.

To give children practice, look for times throughout the day to call attention to the difference between a question and an answer. Some examples:

**Mealtime and snack.** “What’s your favorite food?” you might ask. “Pizza!” says Trey. Then you can describe what just happened. You might say, for example: “I asked a question, and you answered. Listen for the difference: ‘What’s your favorite food?’ is a question. ‘Pizza is my favorite food’ is an answer—it’s telling me what I wanted to know.”

**Group time.** “Who’s wearing a blue sweater?” you might ask. “Tamika,” the children say. Then you might say, “I asked who’s wearing a blue sweater, and you answered that it was Tamika. Can you hear the difference between the question and the answer?”

**Reading a story.** Stories provide ample opportunities to ask questions. Consider the questions asked in Nancy White’s Carlstrom’s *Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear?* You might ask “What does Jesse Bear put on after his bath?” and “What color are Mama Bear’s shoes?”

As a prelude to reading, you will teach basics such as the parts of a book, reading from top to bottom and left to right, the letters of the alphabet, and spaces between words. You will also begin teaching punctuation, specifically: A period marks the end of a sentence, a comma indicates a pause, and a question mark designates a question.

You can describe the question mark as a half circle with a tail and a dot at the bottom. Draw the question mark on poster board and display it in the library center. Invite children to pull a book from the shelf and see if it contains any question marks. One

book with a question mark on the cover is *Are You My Mother?* by P. D. Eastman, the story of a baby bird in search of its mother.

## When they answer incorrectly

When a child gives the wrong answer, avoid shaming or belittling the child. Simply say the correct answer, or if in a group, call on another child to add to the answer. For example, “Greg says our classroom fish needs a bowl. What else does it need to stay healthy?” Our goal is to encourage children to keep trying and participating.

When a child responds with a comment instead of an answer, as Johnny did when asked what’s needed to grow a pecan tree, you can thank the child and repeat the question for another child to answer. You might also look for a kernel of truth in the child’s comment, such as, “Yes, one thing we need is open space where a pecan tree can grow big and tall, like your grandmother’s yard. What else do we need?”

If you continue to get comments instead of answers from some children, you can make a mental note to work with those children individually or in a small group to help them distinguish between the two.

## Questions children ask

Preschoolers are notorious for asking questions. These are opportunities for you to point out the difference between questions and answers and get insight into what’s on their minds. Ramon may ask, for example, “Can we go outside now?” This is a



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yes-no question that you can answer quickly, but offering a brief explanation shows respect for the child. “No, we need to nap first.”

Often children are looking for facts. “When do we feed the gerbil?” asks Malcolm. You or a child may answer, “After we have lunch.” Here you can point out the “when” question and give an answer: “We feed the gerbil after lunch.” Note that preschoolers will be more likely to understand “when” questions if we answer with a familiar routine rather than clock time.

Some questions from children indicate that they are thinking like scientists. “What’s this for?” asks Bridget, holding up a black vinyl cylinder at the edge of a sidewalk. “Why is the sky blue?” and “Where did I come from?” are classics. Experienced teachers know that children usually want a simple answer and respond in kind, telling them only enough to satisfy them.

“Why” questions may serve as a springboard for learning more about a topic. “Why is the sky blue,” for example, may lead to explorations about light waves.

Remember too that you don’t have to have all the answers. It’s fine to say, “I don’t know why pecan trees lose their leaves in winter. Let’s try to find out.” Saying you don’t know gives children permission to admit their own ignorance and follow their curiosity.

It’s equally important to tell the truth. Tell Bridget that the black cylinder is part of a broken water sprinkler, not a trap for big rats (in an attempt to scare her). If you make up something, acknowledge that it’s fantasy. If you say, “Maybe it’s Wonder Woman’s drone,” be sure to add, “I just made that up for fun.” Between ages 3 and 5, children learn the difference between fantasy and reality, and falsehoods will teach them that you cannot be trusted.

## Higher-level questions

To help children further develop their cognitive skills, we can ask open-ended questions. These cannot be answered with yes or no, and they have no predictable or right-or-wrong answer. After reading Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, for example, you might ask, “What would you change your bedroom into, if you could?”

To answer, children need time to think and use their imagination. They have to broaden their thinking beyond the obvious, draw upon experiences and

feelings, and consider many possibilities. Such thinking requires children to stretch their speech and language skills and can give them greater confidence in themselves as communicators.

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We can also ask prediction questions, such as “Will the magnet pick up the penny?” or “What would happen if we didn’t water the geraniums?” Scientists make predictions in performing experiments, trying to find answers to things that puzzle them. Meteorologists predict the weather using knowledge and reason, by studying clouds, humidity, temperature, and so forth.

Asking prediction questions also helps children to understand what they are reading. As you read the title of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (by Laura Numeroff), ask children to predict what the story is about. This helps focus their attention and use visual clues. Or ask what will happen in the story. Will the mouse eat the cookie? Will the mouse give it to baby mice? After finishing the story, compare the before and after predictions.

Ideally a prediction is not a wild guess. Children must use what they know—that we eat cookies and they taste good—and apply it to a new situation. They must anticipate what will happen based on prior knowledge and experience.

## Questions as teaching

One of the most important features of effective teaching is the interaction between teacher and children. By asking questions, a teacher focuses children’s attention, encourages their participation, stimulates their curiosity, and helps them develop language and thinking skills. ■