

Why Kids Ask Why By Christine Belaire, Ph.D.

Are you bombarded by questions from your toddler or school aged child? Do you get frustrated when you answer the question, but it just leads to more and more questions? Don't panic. Your relief is here. Kids do not ask questions for the same reasons that adults ask questions. Therefore, the answers to their questions will not follow the logical pattern that adults use to gain information.

Babies use pre-verbal methods of communicating with adults: they cry, grunt, squeal, etc. Toddlers add behavioral methods such as pointing, hitting, running, etc to their communication. The more children understand and use language to communicate, the better able they are to get their point across. However, children are not proficient at communication even when they possess the ability to use language. Once our children begin to talk, we adults mistakenly believe that they know how to communicate their needs and desires.

Children begin their grasp of language and communication by imitating adults and doing what appears to be socially appropriate. When adults want information about a subject, they will often ask a question. As children imitate adults, they discover that asking questions can gain information, but a child is not sophisticated enough to know what question to ask to gain the desired information. So what happens is they ask the only questions they know. For younger children, that question is usually why. Similarly, older children find themselves curious about issues or subjects that they want more information about or about which they have some thought of their own. Many times these children do not know how to introduce a subject that they want to discuss or they fear saying the wrong thing. As a result, they ask an adult a question about the topic.

The answers to questions posed by children usually do not follow adult logic. Why does not mean why. A child asking for your opinion or to explain something may really be a request to give his or her opinion and gain validation. When a child opens up a topic, usually that means that he is interested in that subject. He may want more information or he may want to explore his thoughts on the idea. The meaning behind the questions is not the question itself. The meaning is usually more indirect. For example, when a child asks the question, "Why is grass green?" he does not want you to give a scientific answer. What the child is saying is "I am curious about the world around me. I notice that some things are different, and I am wondering about how this world I live in works." When a child asks a question, he is saying, "I want to explore this topic."

A better approach to children's questions than answering them directly is to begin a discussion about the topic and ask for your child's point of view. Answering a child's question directly does not teach him much, only basic information. However, opening a discussion allows your child to expand his worldview and think critically. The earlier you begin this skill, the more advanced your child will be in communication. To use the same example of why grass is green, begin to discuss what other things in nature are green. How are they similar or different. Guide your child into discovering an answer to

the question. He may discover that plants are green and that grass is a type of plant so it is also green. This is much more valuable information and teaches early critical thinking skills, which are vital to learning and success. Even children as young as two years old can accomplish this task. You as a parent guide their discovery according to their age level and language ability. Your interaction with a two year old will be less sophisticated than that with a ten year old child, but the process is the same. It is important to note that if your child begins to get frustrated or loses interest, back off of the discussion and follow the child's lead. You want learning to be fun and you want your child to talk freely. If your child feels pressured he will not participate and may hesitate to ask questions in the future.

Older children may ask you a question because they want to discuss a particular topic or because they have an opinion. Children will often fear stating an opinion that may be "wrong" or different from yours; therefore, they will ask you what you think about a situation first. But, what they really want is to tell you what they are thinking and discuss this topic. For example, my niece Michelle (at age 10), out of the blue one day, told me that a friend of hers explained to her that her religious beliefs were wrong and told Michelle that she needed to do things another way. Michelle then asked me, "Do you think she's right?" Talk about a loaded question. My first reaction was to get nervous and begin to sort out religious answers. I also thought about what her mom would want me to say and the boundaries that I may need to be aware of in case her parents wanted to talk about this subject with her. At that point, I asked her, "What do you think?" She talked non-stop for thirty minutes. It was clear that she had given the matter much thought and had already come up with her own conclusions (that were much better than what I would have come up with anyway). We were able to have an extremely effective conversation during which Michelle was able to process her own thoughts and get validation of those ideas. She processed her own ideas and really did not need much from me in terms of opinions or advice. If I had simply given her an answer or a lesson, she may not have been so forthcoming about her own ideas and opinions especially if my answer was not exactly the same as her thoughts. She may have simply listened and approached the subject with someone else at a later date, or she may have given up on her own ideas. What she needed was to process her ideas.

When you begin to help children discover their own answers and opinions, it actually takes the pressure off of you. You no longer have to know all the answers. This method allows you the opportunity to say, "I don't know. What do you think? Let's figure it out together." What you are teaching your children is that learning is a process and that they have the ability to figure things out on their own. It's important to remember that their answer does not have to be right. If a child decides that the grass is green because God painted it green or because all other plants are green, that is fine. It is the process of discovery that is important. Children will learn why grass is green in Science class.

The process of teaching your child through discussion is more time consuming than simply giving an answer. You will be spending a good bit of time discussing different topics with your children. What you are doing is laying a foundation for communication that will sustain throughout your relationship. You are communicating to your child that

you are interested in his ideas and you are willing to explore any topic with him. Opening the lines of communication will only enhance your relationship and prepare the way for more sensitive topics throughout childhood and adolescence. Your child will know that he can come to you and talk about anything. Further, what children want is the interaction with you. By spending this time with your child, you are strengthening your bond and teaching them that they can talk about any subject with you. We often wonder why older children and teenagers do not discuss important issues with us parents. Many times, it is because kids do not like our answers to their questions. They are not as interested in the answers as they are in the process of discussion and learning. As they grow and become more independent, our children need to know that their ideas and opinions are valuable. They need a safe venue to explore their ideas and opinions before they launch them into the world. Parents can provide this avenue by teaching our children how to explore issues and allowing them to talk freely. The more we parents foster learning and open discussion, the more our children will come to us with important topics and the more they will trust their abilities to discover appropriate answers to the many questions they will face. Our responses to the simple questions throughout childhood set the stage for discussions about the more important issues. So, the next time your child asks why, take him on a journey of discovery. Both of you will emerge with a refreshed sense of wonder and a stronger connection, and your child will develop a strong sense of self that will provide a solid foundation for a successful future.