

Skill-Building Opportunities

Constantly Asking Questions

Question: My daughter constantly asks questions, even questioning what I ask her to do. I feel like she's turning into a defiant child. Should I make her stop questioning everything?

It's exhausting, right, this constant stream of questions? But your child's questioning is actually a sign of her desire to understand her experience. Try this: rather than discouraging her questions, help her begin to answer them on her own by promoting Self-Directed, Engaged Learning. With your support, your child can take the lead in her own learning.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live and as long as we learn.

1

Pay attention to what your child is really asking.

Learning and growth, according to Kurt Fischer of Harvard University, happen in spurts that actually change the brain. Fischer notes that these surges of brain activity mean children are strengthening their knowledge or abilities:

“When we look at how people build knowledge in the short term, one of the most basic processes we see is that people need to build knowledge over and over and over in order to get more general stable knowledge.”

Is she trying to understand something or is it mainly about questioning you? If she's trying to understand something besides your requests, encourage her to begin to explore her own ideas.

- When your child asks a question, instead of immediately trying to answer it, give her the opportunity to think more deeply about her question. Say something like: “I wonder why that is?” Or ask: “What are your ideas?”

If she's questioning what you ask her to do, try not to be defensive. Instead, simply state the reasons behind your request, such as: “I want you to wear nice clothes when we go to see your grandmother because nice clothes matter to your grandmother.” Explaining doesn't mean you're letting your daughter do whatever she likes, but rather, helping her understand the “whys” behind your requests. Studies have found that children are more likely to do what you say when they have this understanding.

If she becomes defiant, you can say:

- “I don't like you to talk to me in that tone of voice. I will be happy to talk about this, but you have to use a voice that is less angry. Let me know when you are ready to talk in a more respectful way for this conversation.”

There may be times when she raises a good point with a question, and you want to listen to her. You can say:

- “I hadn’t thought about the point you are making. You are right. So, let’s do this the way you suggest.”

2

Show respect for the importance of asking questions and finding answers.

Ultimately, asking questions is the way we all learn, so it’s behavior you want to encourage. In other words, you don’t want to stop her from asking questions, but rather to help her ask them in ways that make people want to help her find answers.

3

Let her conduct research or set up experiments to answer her own questions.

The research of Patricia Bauer of Emory University shows that children are more likely to learn and remember when they have multiple experiences, when they are directly involved—rather than acting as bystanders—and when these experiences are meaningful and purposeful.

Experiments are great for practicing problem-solving skills. They help your child develop her ability to think critically to satisfy her curiosity. When your child has a question, ask her for ideas for finding the answer through research. For example:

- Show her how to use reliable sources to find answers to questions. Go to the local library and look for nonfiction books, biographies or trusted websites on topics of interest.

Also, help her answer her questions by setting up her experiments.

- Does your child ask questions that can be answered by a science experiment, such as: “Why do we always close the refrigerator door?” You can leave ice out and look at what happens when it’s not kept cold.
- There are even some questions where she questions you that might be answered by an experiment. For example, if your child questions why she has to put her clothes away, you may want to try a few days’ experiment where she doesn’t clean up. What happens? Can she find the clothes she needs? Are they clean and ready to wear?

Maureen Callanan of the University of California at Santa Cruz has examined the role of parents in promoting children’s scientific reasoning in everyday activities. Callanan says that when parents search for answers, they demonstrate a process for investigation to their children:

“What I think is important about the way parents tend to respond is that they are usually encouraging the kids to do this kind of questioning, guiding them in thinking about how to find answers to questions.”

Enjoy the search for answers with her. And don't be afraid to tell your child that you don't have the answers. Your child trusts you to give her accurate information. Moments where both of you are asking questions are opportunities for you to learn together. Share your own strategies for finding answers, like going to the library, writing down your thoughts or asking other people.

4

Find other “experts” to help answer your child’s questions.

Frank Kiel of Yale University has done research with adults that indicates:

“We underestimate just how little we understand about the world. We are incredibly dependent on knowledge in others’ minds; we lean on others’ minds; we outsource our understandings all the time.”

Build on your child's impulse to turn to others for information and encourage her to find many different people to talk to or interview. Think of your friends, neighbors, family members and colleagues as resources for you and your child. She is likely to learn something while you get a break!

5

Expand on her interests.

What does your child typically ask about? Is she interested in how things work? Does she ask questions about people or animals? Look for what makes her eyes light up. These interests can be built upon to open up a world of knowledge for your child and help her become a lifelong learner.

- Encourage your child to express what she is passionate or curious about through art, like painting, drawing, writing, photography or music.
- Ask your child to write a paper as an “expert” on a topic or question and share it with others like a newscaster or journalist.

6

Encourage your child to think about different perspectives.

Do your best to explain the “why” of different situations and help your child see the reasons behind things, like other people's behavior or rule setting.

- Point out the connections between people's thoughts, feelings and actions. For example, you could say something like: “We are not allowed to bring our food and drinks into the store because they don't want any of the clothes for sale to get ruined. Then, they won't be able to sell them.”